Had We But Universe Enough and Time
by MrsHamill

Summary

Rodney McKay is having a very, very bad day.

Notes

Another one that started out small and ended up growing like the fungus under my fridge. Susan and Linaerys beat this sucker with a stick until it cried, and Lin was especially helpful in a couple of spots. I can't thank them enough. If you like it, they're the reason, but if you hate it, it's only my fault.

There are VERY MUCH spoiler warnings for them what needs'em at the bottom of the fic.

See the end of the work for more notes

PART ONE

Rodney McKay was not having a good day.

He woke -- no, returned to consciousness -- on the cold, damp ground, with a pounding headache and a rock jabbing his back. He winced, which hurt, and tried to gently move enough to get the rock out of his back.

"You're awake."
Oh, shit. Michael. That's right, Michael had... had... escaped? Teyla had asked Rodney to go with Michael, to be his friend, his advocate, and... and... Rodney had helped Michael to... to...

"There's no need to feign unconsciousness; I do know you're awake, Dr. McKay."

Michael's voice sounded funny, different. Trying to push his panic away, Rodney managed to open his eyes a crack. That hurt too. "What? Where are we?" It was dark, like twilight or just before dawn and he wondered which it was

"We are waiting for my brothers to find us. It won't be long now. Get up."

Brothers? "What... what do you mean?" Rodney shifted with a groan and managed to sit up. Michael crouched down in front of him and smiled; Rodney's eyes grew wide. Michael looked like... "What...?" Michael looked like a Wraith again. Creepy yellow eyes and everything and it couldn't be... he couldn't have reverted so fast...

Michael smiled, and it was not a nice smile, not a human smile. "I am going back to what I was, to what I am." Suddenly, he grimaced and folded over himself, gasping, shaking. "Hungry... I'm so..."

"It's not too late," Rodney began babbling. "We can go back, Carson can fix you up, make you human, take all the pain away, I know he--"

Michael took a deep breath and lifted his head to glare at Rodney. "Turn me back into you? Why would I want to do that? I am not you. I am not human. I am Wraith." Michael grabbed Rodney's upper arm and hauled him to his feet. Rodney heard the distinctive whine of darts in the distance. "It won't be long now."

"Fine, then, go, go back to them, be a Wraith, I don't care, just... just let me go, let me get back... you don't need me!"

"Ah, but we do. You carry the coordinates for Earth, have the knowledge to get us there... a new and plentiful feeding ground."

Rodney was trembling but tried hard to suppress it. "No. I won't tell you. Listen, you don't want to go back to them, you want to--"

"I want to be what I am!" Michael shouted. He still hadn't let go of Rodney's arm. "You perverted me, you changed me, without my consent, without my knowledge, then you had the gall to lie to me about it! I do not have human parents! This is what I am!" Michael all but rammed his hand into Rodney's face, showing Rodney the unmistakable maw of the feeding slit.

Rodney flinched, tried to pull away from Michael, but he couldn't. Michael's grip was too tight, bruising. "So what are you going to do then? Huh?" Trying for bravado, although he wasn't sure if it would come out that way, Rodney continued. "Are you going to, going to feed on me? Because Colonel Sheppard and Ronon are right behind us and you're as good as dead where you stand!"

"They don't know where we are, Dr. McKay," Michael said and Rodney cringed away from the hot breath on his face.

"Yes, they do! I... I scratched the symbols, I watched you dial but you didn't watch me... they'll be here any second! So just... just leave me..."

Michael's smirk drained away from his mouth and his yellow eyes. "You left them a message." The menace in the words made Rodney shake harder. "Then perhaps I shouldn't wait after all." With a sharp movement, Michael tore Rodney's t-shirt open and slammed his feeding hand down on
Rodney's chest.

It was the worst pain Rodney could have ever imagined. He screamed with it, feeling his life, himself, being ripped away, feeling as if he were on fire from within, his insides burning with the pain, agonizing pain which became his entire world. He screamed and screamed until his throat was raw, until he had no breath, no hope, just the awareness of pain engulfing him and shredding him alive.

Distantly, he heard his name bellowed, then there was darkness.

They got there too late.

A moment, a fraction of a second too late -- John and Ronon saw Michael dragging Rodney through the 'gate and Ronon put on a burst of speed, tried to catch them, to get through the 'gate before it closed. He leapt through it with a roar just as the wormhole disengaged, landing heavily on the other side, swearing a blue streak.

It was Ronon who discovered the symbols scratched in the dirt. But they weren't clear -- he must have had his hands restrained.

For a change, it was Ronon recommending caution. "We don't know where they go! One symbol off and we could be eating vacuum!" he yelled in John's face, preventing him from going through.

John clenched his fists, knowing every second they dithered meant Rodney could be one second closer to death, or worse. But they waited -- for a 'jumper, to test the address, dialing the wrong planet twice before finally figuring out the right one, delay upon delay while John and Ronon grew increasingly frantic.

"We wouldn't be in this situation if..." John cut himself off, ignoring Ronon's glare. Teyla had specifically asked Rodney to go, since she was in the infirmary with a broken ankle, the ankle she had broken pursuing Michael through his murderous rampage. John hadn't known Rodney was at the Alpha site until Teyla told him and now Michael was free and Rodney was with him.

They ran out of the 'jumper before it had even landed, and it only took Ronon a few seconds to find the trail. As they came closer, they heard Rodney scream -- bone-chilling, hideous screaming that meant only one thing to John. Ronon threw himself at Michael, broke the connection, then snapped Michael's neck while John went to Rodney and caught him as he fell.

They were too late. Rodney was desiccated, hollow and drained; his sparse hair white and his blue eyes cloudy, sunken, in a face gone suddenly ancient. But he was alive; John felt a weak, thready pulse under his fingers before he gently lifted Rodney into his arms and sprinted back towards the 'gate.

Ronon tried to take Rodney but John wouldn't let him. He cradled Rodney to himself, murmuring encouragement, begging Rodney to hold on. It only took a moment to get back to the Alpha Site, where Carson was still waiting. "Do something!" John demanded, gently putting Rodney's still form on the same bed where Michael had been restrained.

Carson looked horrified, but still moved quickly. As John and Ronon watched, Carson hooked Rodney up to IVs, heart monitors and pretty much every piece of equipment in the tent, before crisply ordering them through the 'gate to Atlantis. Once back in the city, Rodney was whisked away so fast there might as well have been a sonic boom accompanying his gurney.

Elizabeth was coming down the stairs as the group headed for the infirmary. "John?" He just
waved her to follow as he ran after Rodney, distantly aware of Ronon shadowing him, still feeling panic in every ounce of his body.

It was chaos in the infirmary. There were half a dozen doctors and more equipment than John knew was in the infirmary, all surrounding Rodney's bed. One of the nurses gently pushed John out of the way before drawing a curtain around the immediate area, but a curtain did nothing to hide the noises -- the demands and orders telling him more about Rodney's condition than if he'd been right there watching. John stood in the waiting area, alternating between bouncing on his toes, staring at the curtain, and pacing. He heard Ronon tell Elizabeth what had happened, and conveniently didn't hear her soft-voiced responses and her calling his name.

His attention was completely focused on what was happening behind the curtain. He heard Carson's clipped, order-driven voice mixing with the cacophony of monitors beeping and squealing and the frantic replies, and it only fueled his rage. What the hell had McKay been doing at the Alpha Site in the first place? What possessed Teyla to ask him to go? She hadn't been happy with the Michael experiment in the first place! To ask McKay, who wouldn't have been able to defend himself against the monster Michael had become...

As if his thoughts of Teyla conjured her, he heard her soft voice behind him. He turned and saw her on crutches, Heightmeyer with her, helping her to a seat. They were all there, Elizabeth, Ronon, Teyla, Radek, even Heightmeyer, looking appropriately worried. John clenched his teeth, willed his hands to relax and turned back around, ignoring their soft chatter behind him. He wanted to leap behind the curtain and demand Carson fix what had happened.

He didn't know how long they waited, but Carson finally came through the curtain. He looked gray and drawn and defeated, his eyes sunken and ringed with bruises. John's jaw creaked from clenching and it was all he could do to keep from leaping at Carson, shaking him, demanding he fix Rodney.

"Carson?" Elizabeth was the first to speak and John could feel the rest of them behind him.

It took Carson a few moments to find his voice. "I've... I've done all I can. We don't really understand the feeding process, but I can't... He... There was too much damage." Carson might have been speaking to them all, but he focused on John, his eyes shadowed with guilt, sorrow and pain. "I canna repair it. There's nothing. Nothing I can do."

There was a soft gasp behind John -- either Teyla or Heightmeyer -- but John didn't make a sound.

"Carson, no..." Elizabeth's voice was tight. "There must be something...?"

Carson rubbed his eyes, finally looking away from John, staring a hole in the floor. "His body appears to have tremendously aged, nearly to the point of... It's just as we've seen before, the cells in his body are dying as if he were more than ninety years old. He's... dying. I would estimate he has no more than a few hours left. Maybe half a day."

"There is nothing that can be done?" Teyla whispered.

Carson shook his head; his lower lip was trembling and his face radiated pain and misery. "He's comfortable, on painkillers. That's all... I can do."

One of Teyla's crutches fell to the floor with a clatter. John turned at the noise and saw her bury her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking.

"Teyla, I know you're thinking this was your fault," Heightmeyer said, putting one arm around her.
"Don't. It wasn't your fault."

"I asked him, asked him to go in my stead..."

"This wasn't your fault." Ronon's voice was flat and exhausted.

"Oh, are we assigning blame now?" John hardly recognized the voice coming from him as his own. The words were definitely not his, couldn't be his. They were harsh, unforgiving and cruel and he watched as everyone turned to him in astonishment. "In that case, sure it was Teyla's fault. And it was Heightmeyer's too, for thinking she could play god. And Elizabeth's, for going along with it."

"John, don't--" Carson said, but John ignored him.

"And let's not forget Carson, for coming up with the damn retrovirus in the first place! And Ronon, for not killing the bastard when he had the chance! And me... why, you could say I deserve the most blame--" John abruptly cut himself off. Turning, he headed for the door, barely managing to keep from running, from sprinting away.

Once in the hallway, though, he let go any restraint and took off, ran for the nearest transporter and asked it to take him to the farthest point from the infirmary he could get. He ignored the voices which called after him from the infirmary, ignored people in the corridor, the sounds on his radio, just kept running.

He ended up at the far end of the massive east pier. The sea spray on his face was just ocean mist, even though it burned like acid and tasted like tears.

The prevailing winds on Lantea blew from the east and were cold this time of year. His face slowly grew numb which suited him; he wondered if his body would follow if he took off his clothes. Numb was better than the overwhelming pain and guilt of knowing Rodney was dying and John couldn't do shit about it.

He didn't know how long he'd been there, huddled in a corner tasting salty water, when Ronon finally found him. It would have to be Ronon, taciturn and violent Ronon, the guy they should have listened to all along. John noticed with distant surprise it was dark out.

"Time to go back." When Ronon spoke, his voice sounded as rusty as John felt.

"Oh, I don't know; I kinda like it out here." In the darkness, he could pretend he wasn't a failure.

"Tough. It's time to say goodbye."

Oh, Christ. "I..."

"This isn't about you, Sheppard," Ronon said flatly. "It's about him. He's asking for you. See if you can say goodbye without making a pacha of yourself."

Well, that might not be possible, he thought to himself, regardless of what a pacha was. But he rose, creakily -- Ronon didn't offer him a hand up -- and silently followed Ronon back to the infirmary.

The corridors were already quiet and dim -- with a glance at his watch, he realized exactly how late it was -- and thankfully, they met no one. With one last glare, Ronon left him at the entrance to the infirmary. Rodney's bed was illuminated by one gentle light over it. Elizabeth and Carson were sitting there, speaking to him in low voices -- when John arrived, they both stood and walked away, avoiding his gaze.
Rodney looked horrible: worse than Everett or Gall, about as bad as Sumner before John had killed him. There were IV bags -- probably painkillers -- hung from a pole next to him, and there was a small, thin tube that ended somewhere underneath him. His eyes were cloudy but he was able to focus on John, lifting one shaking hand towards him. John crossed the space between them and took Rodney's hand, cradling it gently. The normally strong, square hand and long, deft fingers, fingers that could tease apart even the toughest of machinery and put it back together again, were liver-spotted and bony, trembling.

"Hey, Buddy." He sat in the chair next to the bed; it was still warm from Elizabeth's body.

"Ronon said you were being a shithead," Rodney wheezed. His voice wasn't much more than a whisper and his breathing was shallow and labored.

John swallowed hard. "Yeah."

"Well, quit it." Rodney took a few gasping breaths. "They need you. You... gotta be good for them."

"I'm sorry."

"You should be." As Rodney spoke, John found he couldn't look into Rodney's face, settling instead for the hand he held in his own. "Listen... already said, you know... said goodbye to... to..." Rodney tried to take a deep breath but only coughed, doubling over.


"No. Listen..." With a last spasm, Rodney's body relaxed again. "We're... you and me, we're good? Right? I mean... There's the, the trust..."

"Rodney... Course we are. Buddy, I never stopped trusting you. I know I said some things..."

"You... do? Really?" John nodded and after a minute, Rodney finally continued. "You gotta... gotta do... a couple of things. For me. For when... when..." Rodney's breath stuttered. "Oh God, I'm gonna... gonna die... I don't want to die... I haven't... haven't even got... got my Nobel... prize..."

John wanted to spout platitudes, wanted to say you're not going to die, we'll figure something out but he knew it would be a lie. "I'll steal a couple for you. One or two in each category." There was a tight, constricting band across his middle, making it hard to take a breath, to speak.

"You will?"

"Yeah." John held Rodney's hand tighter, somewhere within him finding the strength to look into Rodney's ruined face. "Tell me what you want me to do, Buddy."

Rodney closed his eyes and nodded slightly. He licked his lips, which were dry and chapped. John lifted the water from Rodney's table, holding the straw carefully so he could sip from it.

"Thanks." John put the water down and Rodney continued as John sat again. "My ashes... told Elizabeth. Scatter... from a 'jumper? Over the city. Don't... don't want to... leave. Home."

John couldn't have spoken if his life depended on it, but he could nod, so he did.

"And... my sister. My... little sister. In London." Rodney's eyes had sagged shut again, but he opened them enough to eye John. "That's... Canada. London in Canada. You... go tell. Her. 'Bout
me. What... happened. Promise."

He pushed the words out. "I will."

"Tell her... I get it. Now. I get it. Family... important. Didn't know... until I came... here. Atlantis. Should have..." Rodney stopped talking and sagged back onto the bed. John found himself unable to look away from the sluggish rise and fall of Rodney's chest, willing it to keep moving. "I'm scared," Rodney breathed. "I don't want to die."

"I'm here. I'll stay here. I promise."

"You will?"

"I promise."

After a few long moments, Rodney murmured, "Not your fault."

John clenched his jaw, hard, as if his teeth were the only things capable of holding back the screaming, ranting crazy man bubbling inside him.

"Not. Captain Heroic. Not your fault." Rodney's head was turned towards John, but his eyes were closed. "Never got. To tell. You. Wanted to... tell."

"Tell me what, Rodney?" John's voice was as soft as Rodney's because he couldn't draw enough air to speak any louder. "What did you want to tell me?"

"Crush." One corner of Rodney's mouth lifted slightly, but his eyes stayed closed. "Mr. Straight America. Kirk. Had... have... such a... crush." His eyes opened slightly to look at John. "Sorry. Shouldn't have... said..."

John swallowed then did it again, but the huge lump in his throat stubbornly refused to go down. "You did?"

"Yeah." Rodney seemed to drift off for a moment and John began counting his breaths, watched the thankfully-silent heart monitor showing his slowing, weakening heartbeat. With a gasp, Rodney spoke again. "John? John?"

"I'm here, Rodney, I'm here." With an agonizing wrench, John realized that was the first time Rodney had ever used his first name. Why did it have to be here? Why did it have to be now?

"John? Don't... I can't see you..."

"I'm here. I'm not leaving." John squeezed Rodney's hand again.

"Okay... promise? Don't leave... me behind..."

"Never."

"Okay... love you, so... much... sorry I never..." His eyes opened. "Tell Jeannie. I... Tell her... I'm sorry. I... I love. Her."

"I'll tell her, Rodney, I swear. I'll go visit her, I'll tell her."

"Don't. Don't blame... Teyla. Not..."

"I don't. Rodney I don't, I don't blame her. It wasn't her fault."
"Good." Rodney's eyes went unfocused again. "I'm gonna die... I'm... Oh, God... I'm..."

"It's okay, Rodney, I'm here."

"I am too." Elizabeth's soft voice startled John. He didn't move or speak but suddenly realized everyone was clustered around Rodney's bed. After a moment, Elizabeth added, "Rodney, you're a good person. Know that we love you."

John didn't look up, couldn't look away from Rodney's face, but he nodded and felt others beside him, behind him. His team. His friends.

Family.

"You... do?" Rodney's eyelids kept drooping but each time they opened, his gaze was on John. "You love... me?"

"Yes, Rodney, we do." Carson's voice was thick and sad.

There was the scrape of a chair and then John heard Teyla's voice. "Be at peace, Rodney. You are with your family and we will not leave you."


"I know, Buddy." John scooted as close to the bed as he could, keeping Rodney's hand in both of his. "I love you too," he tried to say... his mouth formed the words, but no sounds came out. Rodney's wizened, shrunken hand squeezed his, briefly, weakly.

They waited, in the dim light of the infirmary, as full night settled around Atlantis. John never looked away from Rodney, either counting his breaths or the stuttering, weakening pulse at his throat. Waiting, in case Rodney opened his eyes or spoke again.

He didn't. Some time in the middle of the night, Rodney took his last, shallow breath and his heart stopped. Carson walked around the bed and turned off all the monitors. John heard his friends -- his family -- shifting, sniffing, murmuring behind him. Elizabeth put her small, warm hand on his shoulder. "John?"

John wasn't sure he could, but he managed to clear his throat enough to speak. "Can you..." He sniffed and brushed at his face, which he found wet with tears he didn't recall shedding. "Can you just... give me a minute?"

"Of course."

Elizabeth patted his shoulder and withdrew. Carson did the same. Ronon squeezed his arm and Teyla managed to lean down and kiss his forehead. He heard Carson drawing the curtains again, masking John and Rodney from the world once more. John held Rodney's cooling hand in his and waited for a miracle which never came.

To his surprise, John discovered that being in a family meant you didn't have to apologize for being an asshole. John tried to apologize to Teyla but she silenced him with a look and a hug.

Rodney would have been astonished at the turnout for his memorial service. The 'gateroom was packed; all the doors open so that those who couldn't force their way inside could at least hear the service. Elizabeth had asked John to speak, and he'd spent the evening before trying -- and failing --
to get some words together, some thoughts that might sum up all Rodney had been. When he finally stepped forward to stand over the small, Canadian flag-draped urn bearing Rodney's ashes, he decided to speak from the heart and just go for it.

"Rodney McKay was a jerk," he began and saw some shocked faces. "He was arrogant, short-tempered, rude, brash and at times, vindictive. He could be petty, cowardly and self-serving. He tried to convince people he was afraid of everything, that he lived his life always on the brink of passing out due to manly fear." John paused and took a breath. "Despite all that, he managed to save our lives more times than I can count, and I tried pretty hard to count them."

He looked down at the Canadian flag covering the urn before continuing. "Within a few minutes of meeting him, I wanted to throttle him. I thought he was all bluster and noise, and figured no one could be as smart as he made himself out to be. He proved me wrong." A glance at the faces before him showed that many were now smiling through tears. "He saved my life, he saved Elizabeth's life, he did things that I think surprised the hell out of him. He grew. He took lessons in how to shoot, got in better shape, walked for miles -- okay, not without complaining, but he still did it -- he became something more over the past couple of years, while Atlantis tempered him."

He paused again and swallowed, trying to keep his voice even. "He used to get so pissed off at me, at my having the gene. I never told him this, but I envied him, because while Atlantis might love me, she adored Rodney. He could make her sing in ways I never, ever could, and never will."

Elizabeth and Teyla were in the first rank of people, just before him. They had matching half-smiles on their faces and their eyes were bright but dry. A sobbing Katie Brown leaned on Carson, whose own face was wet. Radek looked wrecked, pale and blank-faced.

John took a big breath and blew it out slowly as he struggled with what to say. Finally, he just said, "In a lot of ways, Rodney McKay was Atlantis, and..." He looked down again and when he continued, it was in a whisper. "And it's not going to be the same without him." John wasn't even sure he wanted to live in an Atlantis without McKay, but he didn't say that, only barely acknowledged it within himself. He carefully turned and walked back into the crowd. Elizabeth passed him on her way to the podium, giving his arm a quick squeeze as she did.

She cleared her throat before speaking. "Atlantis is a dangerous place to live. We all know that. And yet, we stay, we continue to seek her mysteries and her gifts. No one knew better than Rodney McKay how dangerous it is to live here, but still, he stayed." She paused and John saw her swallow. "Even in death, he wanted to stay, wanted his ashes spread over his city. We will honor his wishes and we will continue, as he would have done, in his memory."

She put her hand on the flag. "George Fabricius said, Death comes to all, but great achievements raise a monument which shall endure until the sun grows old. Every person Rodney saved by his deeds, every new, wondrous discovery he made, is a testament to his achievements." She paused again. "That gives me comfort now, in this dark hour. He..." She trailed off and took a deep breath. "He will be missed."

As the strains of Oh, Canada spread across the 'gateroom, a color guard of Canadian servicemen and women took the flag and folded it carefully. John crossed the room again, picked up the urn and slowly carried it to the 'jumper bay. Ronon had asked to come with him, but John had said no, he would do this, this last task for the friend he hadn't known as well as he thought, alone.

Then he would go to Canada and try to explain what had happened to Rodney's sister.

Before he left through the wormhole to the mountain, Elizabeth gave him a tight hug. "Come
back," she whispered, somehow sensing John's turmoil over returning to Atlantis. He didn't reply; he wasn't really sure what he was going to do.

The brass at the SGC met him when he came through the 'gate, murmuring words of sympathy. They gave him an airline ticket to Toronto, a rental car voucher and directions to Jean Miller's house in London, Ontario. John left Colorado Springs without a look back.

Jean Miller was a pretty good judge of character. When a tall, skinny guy dressed in a rumpled uniform of the United States military came to her door, she recognized immediately that he was in shock about something, and it didn't even take the sunken eyes and pale complexion to tip her off. When he said he was there to tell her Meredith was dead, all she could do was blink stupidly.

She practically had to drag him into the house and nail him to the sofa -- he looked like he wanted to run, wanted to be anywhere else but in the Miller house. When she got him seated, perched on the edge of the couch, she pushed Madison's toys off the chair, shoved the doll house to one side and sat, facing him.

"Okay, tell me again who you are, please?" she asked.

He swallowed visibly and would not meet her eyes as he spoke. "I'm John Sheppard, um, U.S. Air Force. I have to... to tell you that Rodney. Rodney's gone, he's dead." And why did he look like he wanted to cry over that? Jean wondered.

"He's dead?" More than four years without one word from him and now... "He's really dead?" There was a hole inside her but she wasn't actually feeling it yet, it didn't seem real. Yet. Meredith was dead?

"Yeah." Sheppard ran his hands through his improbable hair. Absurdly, Jean wondered what the hell he used on it to make it stick up like that. "I... I was with him."

At least he didn't die alone, was Jean's first thought, remembering their grandfather's death, alone and unloved in an institution. "How... wait. You're Air Force? American? What... he was working for the military?"

"Um, sort of. It's a multi-national oversight... uh..."

She gave him a puzzled look; it still hadn't quite hit her, it was all to abstract, too absurd. Meredith was dead? "O-kay... then, tell me how... you know, how did he..."

He looked down at his toes and was silent for a long minute. Finally, he said, "They told me at the mountain you wouldn't sign the non-disclosure agreement, even though you'd been cleared."

Jean blinked. "Oh. So that's what it was all about. No, I didn't, and I'm not going to."

He finally looked up, and while he wore wry smile, it didn't touch his eyes. "I'm going to tell you the whole story anyway. Because you deserve to know."

And he did. It was a long, improbable story he told, about artificial wormholes, travel between galaxies and outer-space vampires. She listened, trying to categorize and not judge, but still wondering if he wasn't a little touched in the head.

But there had been that whole non-disclosure agreement and all...

"So, wait, Atlantis? It's real? And it was in another galaxy?"
"Yeah. We've been in the Pegasus Galaxy--"

"Huh? Why Pegasus? That's just a dwarf galaxy in our local group but it's closer to Andromeda than the Milky Way, why--?"

He looked bemused and seemed to be relaxing slightly. "You look like him. You sound like him too." He swallowed again and continued. "I don't know why it was there, just that the Ancients had put it there."

"Ancients. Flying cities, stable, artificial wormholes. Oh, Mer, how did you get caught up in all this?" It was beginning to hit, now, and she longed for Kaleb to return so she could cling to his warmth.

Sheppard looked confused. "What did you say? You called him--"

"Meredith. That's his... that was," and oh, that hurt. "His real name. Meredith. He hated it, obviously." To Sheppard's still-confused face, she added, "It was a family name. Our parents were... kind of odd."

"He sort of said as much, sometimes. And he talked about you, but not a lot." He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a flash drive. "There's a video on this, him to you. He recorded it a while back, little over a year ago, when we thought the bad guys were going to get us. I think he would have wanted you to have it." She hesitantly reached across and took the flash drive from him. "And I've got the flag, you know, the Canadian flag that was..."

He didn't need to finish; she knew. The flag that was on his coffin.

"It was his wish... he was cremated, scattered over the city. He didn't want to leave. We... I mean, most of us, we consider Atlantis home, now."

Jean looked at the flash drive in her hands that wanted to shake. She could tell that John Sheppard was grieving even more than she was -- or would be -- and she didn't think he could handle having to be strong for someone else. She needed to hear the story and so kept her composure as best she could.

Hearing the car pull into the driveway and the door slam made her wilt with relief. "That's my husband, bringing home Madison, our daughter," she said, standing.

Sheppard almost leapt to his feet. "I should go..."

"No, you shouldn't. Just... just stay there." She moved towards the door to block his escape as Kaleb and Madison came in.

"Mommy!" Madison let go of her father's hand and ran to Jean, holding a picture she'd drawn at pre-school.

Kaleb looked into the living room and blinked. "We've got company?"

"Yeah," Jean said, absently giving Madison a hug. "He's come to... I mean, Mer's... gone. He... died. You know, my brother we haven't seen since before our wedding?" Jean bit her lip and Kaleb gave her an alarmed look, putting one arm around her shoulders. "This is Mr. Sheppard... I mean," she looked at Sheppard in confusion. "I don't even know your rank. What are you, a general or something?"

"No, just a lieutenant colonel." Sheppard inched closer to them, putting his hand out. "John
Sheppard. John. Look, Mrs. Miller, I should--"

Kaleb shook Sheppard's hand firmly as Jean said, "No, you don't. You're staying here. I need more information. And my name's Jean. Or even Jeannie, just not Mrs. Miller."

"But I'm intruding--"

"Hi." Madison had been quiet up until that moment; now she spoke, looking up at Sheppard -- John -- with curiosity.

"Uh, hi?" John looked a little nonplussed; Madison had that effect on people at times.

"Madison, this is a friend of your Uncle Meredith's," Jean said. "His name is John Sheppard."

"Hi, Uncle John."

"Oh, I'm not--"

"You want to see my room?" Madison walked over to Sheppard, took his hand and tugged on it. Jean had to smile; Madison was a pretty good people-reader too, and she was never that forward unless she could tell the person was worth it.

"Go on, she'll bug you all night unless you go with her."

John looked a little pole-axed but allowed himself to be dragged up the stairs. Kaleb, who had been quiet but watchful, turned Jean and put both hands on her shoulders. "Tell me."

Jean felt herself close to tears as she said, "Oh, Kaleb. He's dead. My big brother..."

She dissolved into tears and Kaleb hugged her hard.

Jean had the best husband in the universe. She'd always suspected it, but his actions over the next few hours proved it.

He got just enough information out of her to understand what'd happened, then wiped her tears away with his thumbs, kissed her gently and urged her upstairs to make up the guest bedroom while he started dinner. By the time Madison released John, dinner was ready and another place set. John blinked but seemed game; by the time he came to the table, he'd put his tie in his jacket pocket and had draped it over the chair in the living room, had rolled his shirt sleeves up to his elbows, and undone the top two buttons of his shirt. When he handed something across the table to Kaleb, Jean caught sight of one hell of a scar on his throat and wondered, but didn't say anything about it.

He had three helpings of Kaleb's tofu-chicken casserole, which Jean took as a good sign. He was far too skinny and she wondered just how long it had been since he had a good, home-cooked meal.

After dinner, she insisted he help her clean up and by the time they were done, Kaleb had all the family photo albums out on Madison's big play-table in the living room. John put up a token resistance, but Jean was at least as stubborn as her brother was... had been... so he didn't stand a chance.

They looked through the albums most of the evening. Jean had made it a point in her life to never let Madison see her cry, and that was the only thing preventing tears as she showed John her life with Meredith. She loved her big brother more than he had ever known, loved him and missed him
but never once thought he was gone for good... until John Sheppard had shown up on her doorstep.

It got late and Kaleb took Madison upstairs and got her bathed. While Kaleb read to Madison, John lingered over the pictures showing him Meredith's life. Their laughter helped offset the sadness -- they laughed at pictures of a skinny little Meredith holding his baby sister, at the pictures of all the science fairs where Meredith had always shone, and at least one picture of his many degrees.

When Jean came back down from tucking Madison in, she found John still looking at the albums. She plopped down on the floor again next to him, and sighed. He looked at her curiously. "There's nothing recent," he said.

"Yeah. About that," she said, looking down at the albums. "He sent me this picture," she pointed to the one of his second PhD, "just before Madison was born. That was the last time I heard from him."

"But she's... what, four?"

"Yeah. Mer didn't like my choices." She sighed again. "Our parents died when I was in college -- a car crash. Mer was at Northwestern, getting his first Master's. I took a year off, so I didn't graduate until I was twenty-three. Mer had gotten me into the theoretical mathematics department at California Institute of Technology under Graeme Peel... he kept telling me what an honor it was, how important it was."

She was still looking at the pictures, but her mind was miles and years away. "Thing was, I didn't like 'the game' as Mer always put it. It was cutthroat, far more than just the 'publish or perish' routine and what I saw of it -- it had absolutely no appeal. Plus, I'd met and fallen in love with this tall English major back in Toronto, and was really beginning to think there was more to life than being smart."

John scrubbed his fingers through his hair. "Yeah, I can see how that'd piss off Rodney."

"You have no idea." She shook her head. "Dr. Peel was a really wonderful guy, though. He noticed how miserable I was, sat me down, had a long talk with me, and finally told me just to go home. He said he'd be sad to lose me, but that I was young, I still had time to make my mark in life. Mer was livid. Screamed at me over the phone until I hung up on him. I came home to Kaleb and fifteen minutes later, I was pregnant. Mer wasn't even at our wedding."

"Christ," John murmured. "I knew McKay could be an asshole, but..."

"He could at that. But you know, he had a good heart. He swore he'd take care of me, after Mom and Dad died, and he did, mostly." She traced the last picture with her fingers, wondering why it hurt so badly to know he was dead, and why John was obviously hurting too.

Then John spoke softly. "I... need to ask you something, and I don't even know if you'll know the answer. And it's pretty embarrassing, too."

Jean smiled. "It's okay, John. Ask away."

He wouldn't meet her gaze. "Was Rodney..." He paused and swallowed. "Was Rodney bisexual?"

She blinked. "Yeah, he was, he came out to me after Mom and Dad... Oh." The penny dropped and Jean's eyes widened. "You didn't know, did you. Is that why you're..."

He shook his head and Jean reached across and put her arm around his shoulders. Now it was beginning to make some sense -- John's shock, his sadness, all of it. Had he been in love with
Meredith? "I'm sorry, John," she murmured over his bowed head.

"It's not... it's not that important, I mean, it's just something he said..."

"Shut up, John," Jean said softly, squeezing him gently. "Just shut up."

John stayed at the Miller home for just over two weeks. By the time he left, he looked far better than he had when he had arrived -- calmer, not as thin and drawn. He'd babysat Madison (who came to adore him), helped out around the house and had long, quiet walks with Jean or runs with Kaleb.

And he told them stories, told all of them stories about living in the Pegasus Galaxy (though he wouldn't talk about the Wraith in front of Madison, something Jean was thankful of). He talked about living in a city that was one step down from sentient, told stories about the weird people they'd met in the Pegasus galaxy, about his team and teammates, and about Meredith.

It had taken him a while to start talking, but once he had, John couldn't seem to stop. John told Jean about Meredith trapped at the bottom of the ocean, blowing up five-sixths of a solar system, saving a world inhabited only by children, being pushed off a balcony to test a personal shield. John really seemed to come alive when he spoke about her brother, Jean and Kaleb noticed that right away.

Jean watched the video of Meredith in the privacy of her bedroom, on Kaleb's work laptop. She cried and Kaleb had comforted her, and they'd talked about John's obvious mourning. The next day, Kaleb asked John to come with him to work at the university. He took John to the gym and she later found out John had absolutely beaten the shit out of the 'heavy bag,' whatever that was. It seemed to help, so Jean didn't question it.

Finally, John decided to leave, even though Jean told him, truthfully, that he was welcome to stay as long as he wanted. John Sheppard was thoroughly adopted by the Miller family, and Jean hoped he knew it. Over breakfast that morning, she asked him what he was going to do, and if he was going back to Atlantis.

"I don't know," he said, looking into his coffee. "I haven't decided yet. But I need to do something."

"You know I'll cover for you if any of your superiors come calling," Jean said. "But I'd feel better if I knew where you were going."

He smiled but didn't look up. "I'm thinking about going back to California. I spent some time in the northern part of the state when I was a boy and I've always loved it. I think I need some alone-time, just to... to..."

When he didn't continue, she did for him. "You need to figure out what you're going to do with the rest of your life, John."

"You think?"

"Yeah. I do." She chuckled along with him. "But I think you should go back to Atlantis. From what you've told me, they need you there."

"Yeah."

That had been the extent of it; John left that afternoon. He drove to Toronto and flew back into the
U.S. Jean worried about him (though he did send her one postcard from Chicago, thanking all of them, and another from Big Sur in California), but tried to keep it from preying on her mind.

Until one weekend afternoon, nearly three weeks after John left, when there was another knock on the door. She opened it to see two women and one huge man standing on her porch. "Jean Miller? I'm Dr. Elizabeth Weir--"

Jean gasped. "Oh my God, Elizabeth, Teyla and Ronon?" Seeing them made John's crazy story far more real.

All three of them smiled but it was Weir who continued. "We thought he might have told you. We're looking for John and... well, we have news. For you as well as him. May we come in?"

"Yes! Sure, please come in..." Ronon was every bit as tall and astonishing as John had said, and Jean could have picked him out of a lineup without any problems.

"The house is a mess, I'm sorry, please sit down, can I...?"

"Please, do not concern yourself." Teyla Emmagan's voice was far more beautiful than she expected. She was wearing a walking cast. "We are fine. But you should sit. We have news for you, and a need to find John."

Blankly, Jean sat on the sofa. Weir sat next to her. "Do you know where John is?" she asked gently.

"I... think so, in a general way, anyway... what's all this about?"

They shared a look and Teyla crouched at her feet, put one warm hand on her knee. "Rodney has come back to Atlantis."

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PART TWO

Rodney McKay was not having a good day.

It was just another in a long string of them, crisis heaped upon crisis until he was about as crazy as he always said Major Sheppard was. He took a deep breath and delicately tried to remove the damaged crystal from its slot, but his hands were shaking so badly from hunger and pain that he couldn't.

"How's it going, McKay?"

Rodney looked up and sighed. "How do you think it's going? I'm pretty sure this crystal -- at least this crystal -- is shot, but even if I can get it out of there, what the hell am I going to replace it with? And there're probably a dozen more damaged, and I don't know if--"

"Breathe, Rodney." Sheppard looked as careworn and drawn as all of them, but he managed a weak smile. "How long has it been since you've eaten?"

He waved one hand. "How should I know? It's not like we have anything to eat anyway. The last of the MREs disappeared sometime in the last week or so."

"Take a break. Carson's found some roots he says are edible; they're not too bad once they're roasted."
"I don't have time to take a break, Major," Rodney said, alarmed at how close to an exhausted whisper his voice came. "They'll find us any minute and we need this 'jumper."

"I know. I know, McKay. But we need you sharp even more than we need this 'jumper. C'mon."

Slumping, Rodney allowed Sheppard to pull him from the 'jumper onto the sandy, thankfully shady beach. They'd parked (crashed) the 'jumper just under the canopy of some tall, spreading trees and Sheppard had set up a sort of camp just a few feet away -- a tarp and a couple of bins and some sleeping bags. There was a stream running nearby and the water was drinkable, if a little nasty from mineral deposits. The toilet was 'that tree over there and bring your own toilet paper,' which was so very wrong and disgusting on so many levels, and walking on sand made his wrenched knee flare with pain.

There were several leaf-wrapped lumps in the embers of their small campfire. Bending awkwardly, still favoring his hip from where it was hit with shrapnel on P22-304, Sheppard used a large stick to tease one of them out, gently rolling it onto one of their few camp plates. "Carson said the leaf is okay to eat too, but it's pretty gross if you ask me. Bitter."

Rodney took the plate and picked up the dented spork they'd all been using -- communal germs were a thing of beauty, oh yes -- and used it to peel off the burnt leaf wrappings. The actual root looked a little like a sweet potato, only kind of yellowish-green in color; definitely not appetizing. He took a tentative bite. "Could be worse," he sighed. "I don't suppose we have any salt left."

Sheppard gave him a look and Rodney sighed again. As long as he didn't look at it and held his breath while he ate it, it was palatable. Barely. At least they had plenty of water to wash it down, and it was food, which his body appreciated.

"Where's Carson?" Rodney said as he bent to get another root.

"He's with Elizabeth." Sheppard was standing on the other side of the fire, looking out towards the ocean.

"Is she okay?" The second one was as yucky as the first, but he forced himself to eat it all -- who knew when their next meal may be?

"No. She's dying."

Rodney sighed. "I know that. I mean, I don't know... Can't he do--"

"He thinks she's bleeding internally, Rodney. And he obviously can't operate out here. So, no. It's amazing he's managed to keep her alive for nearly a month as it is." Sheppard's voice had that inflectionless, robotic tone to it that usually meant he was suppressing some emotion. Could be despair, could be pain, could be any damn thing. Rodney was so numb, so exhausted, he couldn't even figure out what he felt.

Finished with his 'dinner,' Rodney stood, went to relieve himself and stumbled back to the campfire, all but falling on his sleeping bag.

"Rest," Sheppard said. "We can afford a couple of hours and you'll feel better for the sleep."

He couldn't argue with that if he tried. He just wished Major Sheppard would rest also, but he knew that wasn't going to be in the game plan.

Rodney woke to the sound of voices. It was dark -- their campfire had been left to burn out, not that
it was needed for anything more than cooking.

"You did what you could, Carson." That was Sheppard's voice.

"It wasn't bloody enough, this shouldn't have happened... I should have..."

"Stop it. We can play the blame game all we want, but the truth is it was the Wraith who killed our people. Elizabeth is dead. Teyla is dead. Sumner is dead." He paused, and when he continued, his voice sounded horrible, strangled and defeated. "Atlantis is dead."

"And we're dead too." Rodney surprised himself by speaking his thoughts out loud. He lifted his head, eyes gummy from too little sleep, and saw them outlined against the brighter darkness of the planet's ocean.

They both looked at him -- pale, unfocused white blobs of faces -- and even though he couldn't see them clearly, he knew what expressions they wore. "Yeah," Sheppard whispered.

Rodney's watch had long since died, but he could tell he'd had enough sleep to get back to work. Without a word, he climbed painfully to his feet and limped to their trusty latrine. When he came back, the camp looked deserted, though he knew Carson and Sheppard were close by. Numbly he went to the 'jumper and began looking at the crystals, trying to figure out which ones had blown and which ones hadn't, and whether the damn ship would ever fly again.

Elizabeth was dead. He wanted to cry, but he had no tears left.

He must have been incredibly exhausted since he'd managed to sleep without nightmares. For the last week all he'd had whenever he closed his eyes were visions of the horror they'd been living with for too damn long. The Wraith draining a screaming Ford. Simpson putting the last bullet in her gun in her head. Ronon's suicidal charge against an entire unit of drones. Sumner, with a P-90 in each hand, shooting everything in sight, even as he screamed at them to leave, knowing he was going to go up with the fatally overloaded naquadah generator. Teyla, cut almost in half by weapons fire, still managing to push Elizabeth into the 'jumper before her, both of them a bloody mess.

At least they'd managed to evacuate most of the Atlantis personnel to Earth before destroying it, the entire city going up in one massive explosion. The Wraith would not reach Earth via Atlantis... but neither would Rodney or anyone with him. Three puddlejumpers escaped with the last of the personnel who hadn't been evacuated. He knew one 'jumper had been destroyed but the other -- with Zelenka and Stackhouse and possibly Kusanagi -- he had no idea where it was. They might have made it to the Genii homeworld, but he kind of doubted it.

And here they were, possibly the last of the Atlantis expedition: wounded, hurt, bruised and already dead -- they just hadn't fallen over yet.

Rodney pushed all of that aside and went back to work. He managed to tease the damaged crystal out of its socket and began tracing the circuit back, trying to figure out if he could bypass it. When the sun came up, it found him still at work. He was growing increasingly frustrated because he'd already re-rerouted and re-re-rerouted until there were no circuitry routes left -- not enough undamaged crystals to serve too many key systems. His exhausted fumbling caused him to put just a little too much pressure on what was probably an already cracked crystal, which snapped in two.

He looked at the pieces in his hands in disbelief for a moment, and then with an inarticulate scream of rage, threw them at the opposite wall of the 'jumper. It was the last straw, the final indignity. Sheppard appeared at the hatch, looking at him and Rodney let his chin drop to his chest, trying to
catch his breath. "I can't," he moaned. "I just... I just..."

Sheppard was next to him in three gimpy strides, taking Rodney's shoulders in too-warm hands. "It's okay."

"No, it's not! They've managed to find us wherever we go! This damn thing has plenty of power, but the hits from--"

"I know, Rodney." He swallowed and looked both defeated and a little green around the gills. "We took on a lot of damage at M2Y-003--"

"And at P22-304, and M4R-667, and all the other damn planets we've been to because the fucking Wraith always show up, it's like they've got us tagged or some damn thing and no, I've already thought of that, there's nothing about us I could find that could tip them off. Nothing." Rodney found himself close to sobbing in frustration and pain, and that would never do. "She's not going to lift again. The cloak is gone, the shields are gone, we're out of drones. We're almost out of ammo, completely out of food, and I can't do this any more. I just can't."

Sheppard sighed and nodded. "We're less than a mile from the 'gate. I guess we'll have to start going to ground-based 'gates from now on."

And that freaked out Rodney far more than anything else. Sheppard never gave up, always goaded Rodney to find solutions even when there were no solutions. He'd cajole, threaten, bribe -- but never just accept. Rodney looked at him closely and saw the spots of color on his cheeks, and the too-bright eyes. Before he could stop himself, he raised his hand to Sheppard's forehead. "Jesus. You're burning up."

"I'm okay."

"No, you're not. And I bet you're bleeding again."

"McKay..."

"C'mon, we'll go tell Carson--"

"And he'll do what?" John hissed. "We don't even have Tylenol, McKay! We used all of it up on keeping Elizabeth alive and I'm not going to add to Carson's guilt any more than you're going to complain about the knee I know has swelled up!"

Rodney just looked at Sheppard, trying to think of something to say, something to do, anything to get them out of the situation. He couldn't think of anything at all. "We're really fucked, aren't we?" he finally breathed, his mouth too dry to swallow.

Sheppard closed his eyes and sucked in a ragged breath. "Yeah," he said.

They didn't have the strength or the time to bury Elizabeth, so they ended up burning her body, as they'd done to Teyla's. Rodney hadn't known Teyla very well -- she had only been on Atlantis for a couple of months before Ford had woken the Wraith -- and he had been too busy to properly mourn. But Elizabeth was as much a friend as a colleague, a boss: simply wrapping her in a tarp and setting fire to her body seemed sacrilegious or something. But it was all they could do, aside from leaving her to rot, which was worse.

Carson was subdued and seemed defeated. He helped where he could, carried his share of what little they had left in his backpack, and followed Rodney through stargate after stargate, but did so
numbly, with no easy banter, no discussion, no complaints.

For days they went planet to planet, looking for people and finding culled, burned villages; looking for help and finding bodies; resting when they ran out of what little energy they had left. Rodney wracked his brains for ground-based addresses, anywhere they hadn't been recently, anywhere they might find help. He was still upset over his failure to fix the damn 'jumper and Sheppard was getting sicker and trying to hide it, which is why it was completely Rodney's fault that Carson got killed by the Pegasus version of a fucking grizzly bear on their third stop, M2Y-998.

He turned and had time for one panicked shout of "CARSON!" before the damn thing was on them, not even roaring. It practically took Carson's head off with one swipe and Sheppard had to expend some of their precious ordnance to kill it before it took them out too. In the aftermath, Rodney noticed blankly that Carson's blood was all over the DHD. He thought about throwing up, but you can't hurl anything when there's nothing to hurl.

Neither of them moved or made a sound. Then Sheppard wobbled slightly and grabbed hold of Rodney to stay upright. "We have to go," he said, his voice low and hoarse.

Rodney turned and gave him a horrified look. "No... we've got to..."

"No, we can't. Darts, Rodney. I can hear them." He shuddered and managed to stand up straight again. "They were probably already here and the 'gate activity alerted them."

"I..." Rodney looked down at Carson's corpse and wanted to scream and throw things.

"Try the planet where we found Dex. Do you remember the address?"

"But it's not--"

"Just dial. Please."

Jerking his head down in a parody of a nod, Rodney dialed the planet. If it was daytime there, they were going to get burnt because he didn't have any sunscreen with him at all. As the 'gate whooshed open, he realized the stupidity of that thought and just led the way through.

There were no Wraith waiting for them and the sun was down. They stayed in the vicinity of the 'gate for a while, checking the fading life-signs detector, waiting for an ambush that never came before Sheppard said, "C'mere. The cave's over this way."

They limped through the forest to the rocks and the little cave that would protect them from the harsh sunlight when the sun came up. If they were still there, still alive, when the sun came up. Sheppard led the way in and immediately turned on his flashlight and moved to the back of the cave. "Yes." A rough cloth lay in a heap at the back of the cave. "Help me move this."

Frowning, Rodney went to the back of the cave and lifted the cloth, revealing a shallow depression stuffed with... "Food?"

"Some. It's supplies. Ronon told me before... before, gave me the coordinates for a few of these caches he'd hidden away, we've already been to all the rest, which were empty. I hoped this one hadn't been touched."

There wasn't much. Aside from some smoked meat, most of the food had rotted. The cache held water, some crude weapons, and they could use the various containers once they'd been emptied. It was better than nothing, but still not great.
Sheppard started to build a fire but Rodney gently pushed him out of the way, took over the task. Sheppard looked horrible, pale, his eyes ringed with bruises and there was a sheen of sweat over his body, which was trembling. Rodney was willing to bet he had blood on the filthy, black BDUs he wore. "Sit down before you fall down," Rodney said, carefully sitting himself while building the fire with firewood already present. His knee was absolutely killing him, but he knew there was nothing he could do about it. "And get rid of the pants. I can at least wash it out again to give you some relief."

With a weak smirk, Sheppard began to unfasten his pants. "I always knew you wanted to get in my pants, McKay." The usual jibe was lost in his hiss of pain as he let his pants fall before almost falling over himself.

"Not like this," Rodney choked out, finding out just how badly hurt Sheppard was. His wound, high up on his left thigh, was a bloody mess. Carson had been tending it, but they had run out of bandages days -- maybe weeks -- ago, so it probably hadn't been looked at since then. The last one had bled through. Rodney didn't have to be a doctor to see it was badly infected -- there were angry red lines leading in all directions from it and the wound actually smelled. "Okay, I'm going to have to get something clean to bandage that up again." He rummaged in his backpack and came up with a t-shirt that was still reasonably intact.

Rodney's awkward doctoring must have hurt like hell, because Sheppard's face got even paler through the water sluicing and rough bandaging. They had nothing else to treat it with, but at least it was sort of clean, and Sheppard slightly more comfortable.

"Sorry," Rodney mumbled as he finished tying up the makeshift bandage.

"S'okay, McKay," Sheppard gasped. Sweat dripped down his face and he pressed his mouth into a pinched line. "I'll take first watch, you go try to sleep."

"No, that's all right--"

"Sleep, McKay. We're gonna need that brain of yours."

There wasn't much to eat, just a few of the roasted, cold roots and something that looked and tasted like beef jerky. There was a small hole on the side of the cave opposite the food cache, and that's where they relieved themselves.

Rodney's sleep was fitful and restless. His body was too sore, his stomach too empty, his brain too full, his heart just plain sick. Any dreams he had were filled with blood and fire, of Carson, of Atlantis, of chances lost. He hadn't seen his sister in more than four years, and he realized he never would again, because he was going to die in the Pegasus Galaxy, and there was nothing he could do about it.

He hadn't even won his Nobel Prize, yet.

While he tried to sleep, he was vaguely aware of Sheppard moving around, putting things away, doing something. When he finally gave up trying, the sun was up and glaring into the cave -- the heat was already pretty bad and Sheppard had let the fire go out.

"You don't have to get up yet," Sheppard said quietly.

Rodney shook his head. "Can't sleep anyway. Parrish said there were some carrot-like plants here, I should go try to find some."

"Wait until the sun goes down, it'll be less dangerous and cooler." Sheppard shifted with a pained
grimace; he was propped up against their backpacks and on his own sleeping bag, with his P90 in his arms. "If you're going to be okay, I'll try to get some sleep. Be careful, I've got a tripwire across the front of the cave hooked to some C4. Don't... don't leave without warning me, okay?"

Rodney nodded shortly and hunkered down to try and eat and drink. At least the water wasn't heavy with minerals, even if it did taste a little stale.

"McKay."

Rodney's head jerked up -- damn. He'd managed to fall asleep. "M sorry, I'm awake..."

"It's okay. The sun's gone down and we need to talk about what to do next."

Sheppard was standing and looked slightly better. "I shouldn't have fallen asleep, I'm sorry," Rodney began, but Sheppard cut him off.

"It's okay," he repeated. "Go take a piss, drink some water, then we need to talk."

Sheppard had rebuilt their small fire at the front of the cave. Sheppard had put two of those horrible roots near it to warm and though Rodney's mouth rebelled at the thought of eating another, his stomach told him he'd better just do it.

While they ate, sitting next to each other and sharing the communal spork, Sheppard said, "So, listen. If you can find some of those carrot things, go ahead. But leave them here, and I want you to move on alone."

Rodney gave him a panicked look. "No! I'll... I'll just stay until you're--"

"Stop, Rodney. Just stop. Think. If you go on alone, you might be able to find food and shelter, and even some kind of medicine." He took a deep breath. "I'm pretty strong, I'll be okay for a while, but it sure would be easier with something for the infection."

"Major... I..." Rodney felt panicked. "What'll you do if the Wraith come? You can't always be on guard!"

"I've got the trip wire and... well, if they come, they're going to get a rude surprise if they try to get me." As he spoke, Sheppard opened his jacket. He was wearing a 'vest' of C4. "I'll take 'em out with me, Rodney."

Oh no. Oh, no no no. This was just so wrong, so wrong on so many levels... "I don't think I can do this," Rodney whispered, staring at Sheppard and utterly horrified. Sheppard the suicide bomber.

"Sure you can." Sheppard's voice was soft and hoarse but certain. He reached over and put his hand on Rodney's thigh. "I trust you, Rodney. I know you can do this." He grinned weakly. "Besides, we both know how much you want me -- you'll have to come back for me."

"Don't." Rodney wanted to scream, to cry, to do a million things he had no energy to do. "Don't trivialize this. You want me to leave you! You want me to leave you to die here and--"

"McKay, stop."

"I won't do that, Major!"

"You're not. Yeah, you're leaving me here, but not to die. I can't make it much further, McKay, not like this. I'm a liability to you right now. You're the one best qualified and least injured for this."
Sheppard looked earnest and trustworthy and exhausted, and he was relying on Rodney who was, by his own admission, not the most reliable of people, especially in a crisis. "Listen, if you know what you're looking for, then go out now while it's still dark and get some of those things. When you come back, we'll talk about it some more."

Except Rodney knew Sheppard wouldn't change his mind.

The fourth world in three days -- there was an emptied-out village not that far from the 'gate, and Rodney took the chance that the Wraith wouldn't be back anytime soon. As he ransacked, limping from house to house, he kept repeating to himself, "Remember... remember..." Remember to check the life signs detector first. Remember to turn it off as quickly as possible, to preserve energy. Remember to listen carefully for darts. Remember not to go far from the DHD, Wraith could be close enough to ambush you.

Remember the address of the Alpha Site. "The Daedalus will come back, they won't leave us here," Sheppard had said. "Stop by, frequently. But be careful when you do. You'll know if our people have been there."

Remember to always reserve the last bullet for yourself. That was the one Rodney had the most trouble with.

There was food, some of it still good, and oh my God, bread. Rodney had to hold himself back from gorging. His knee had only gotten worse but he was still able to carry things in his backpack, so he loaded it up with food. He'd picked up a long branch a couple of worlds back that he was using as a crutch, which helped. Slightly. He found an outhouse and he welcomed that most of all, especially since he'd developed the runs -- probably from eating such horrible food.

He walked into one of the larger huts and froze -- it must have been owned by some kind of apothecary. There were intact jars all over, neatly labeled in something close enough to Ancient for him to recognize, food as well as other things. He took what he thought were painkillers and something maybe close to an antibiotic, and hobbled as quickly as he could back to the 'gate, happy that he might actually help Sheppard.

Rodney couldn't fight, he wasn't a warrior. He wasn't much of anything, anymore, because there was nothing for him to use his expertise, his genius on. Instead, he was a reluctant survivor; he still half-wished he'd been killed when Atlantis had been, rather than relegated to the pathetic, miserable life he now lived.

It was just dawn on the planet where Sheppard was hiding and Rodney felt almost happy at the thought of real food, actual medicine, and Sheppard feeling better. He let his guard down, and that was the one thing Sheppard had told him most often to remember. Never let your guard down.

Smoke coming from the direction of the rocks, the cave, and the whine of darts made him freeze. No. He fumbled for the life signs detector and turned it on, numbly absorbing half a dozen spots, all heading for the 'gate.

He was so stunned it took him longer than it should have for him to turn and move as fast as he could for the DHD. A stunner bolt cut so close to him he could almost feel the heat of it and a dart whined, heading directly for him. He dialed as fast as he could, shaking, screaming inside that it was wrong, wrong it shouldn't have happened...

The wormhole belled out and stabilized. Dropping everything he was carrying, Rodney half-ran, half-limped for it. Stunner bolts fell all around him but somehow, some way, didn't hit him. Just as
he reached the event horizon, the dart above him fired, hitting the 'gate in a concussion that propelled him through so hard he landed on his head on the other side.

He barely registered hitting the ground before everything went dark.

PART THREE

"He literally fell through the 'gate to the Alpha Site," Elizabeth said.

Much to John's shock, he was with Elizabeth, Ronon and Teyla aboard an Asgard ship headed home, headed back to Atlantis. They had found him a day and a half earlier; Jean had told them where he was and all they had to say was, "Rodney's come back to Atlantis" for John to go with them. Carter had apparently sweet-talked the Asgard named 'Thor' (John still didn't believe it was the real Thor) into flying them back as fast as possible. It had picked them up at P4M-399 and Atlantis was a bit over six days away. Six days too long for John.

"He was in pretty bad shape according to Carson," Elizabeth continued. "Before we 'gated to P4M-399, Atlantis dialed through and Carson said he's still in a coma."

"But he's alive." John wanted to get out and push the damn ship to make it go faster.

"He's alive." Elizabeth nodded and smiled. "He's really alive."

"How?" John demanded. "I saw... he died..."

"Dr. Zelenka believes it is a Rodney from another universe." Teyla seemed to have caught some of John's antsyness; she seemed almost on edge. "Much as the old Elizabeth we found a year ago."

"But it really is Rodney."

"Yes, John, it really is." Elizabeth smiled gently at him.

Jean couldn't come with them, even though she was now more than willing to sign the non-disclosure agreement. Landry had assured them that once the final clearance came through, she'd be sent to Atlantis on the Daedalus's next run and that had to satisfy them all -- especially John.

Time passed so slowly. Ronon was more than willing to beat up on John frequently, helping pass the time as quickly as possible (spending it practically unconscious helped). Teyla also sparred with them, and though Elizabeth wouldn't fight, she observed and sometimes laughed (and sometimes appeared to be biting her lip to either avoid laughing or ordering them to stop).

Each morning when he woke up, John remembered all over again that he was going home. His real home, with Rodney. He was pretty sure Atlantis became 'home' for him sometime before Kolya's invasion of it, but when 'home' became 'Atlantis with Rodney' -- he wasn't sure at all when that had happened.

When they finally arrived, a welcoming committee consisting of Lorne, Zelenka and Carson met them at the beam-down point in the 'gateroom. All John wanted to do was run for the infirmary, so some tiny part of him stepped up and answered questions, smiled, made nice, while the bulk of him strained on its leash.

Luckily, they had to go to the infirmary anyway, for scans and blood-work and all the other stuff necessary whenever they ventured off Atlantis. Zelenka and Lorne went with them, though they
were, thankfully, silent. John couldn't hold back and kept searching the area with his eyes. "I've got him in the back, in a more private alcove, Colonel," Carson said, correctly interpreting John's eagerness. Carson looked almost as relieved as John felt.

"What happened?" John said, ignoring the tiny pain of the needle.

"Lie down here, let me run the scan, and I'll fill you in." John did as directed, keeping still with an effort. "He was a bloody mess when we found him," Carson began. "Luckily, Dr. Biro was at the Alpha Site, cataloging and packing up the remaining medical supplies for return to Atlantis. The team on the 'gate alerted her so she was able to get to him immediately. That was about twelve days ago, and he's been mostly unconscious since."

The scanning done, Carson motioned for Elizabeth to take John's place. "He was dehydrated, badly malnourished, and his left knee was wrenched so badly I thought something was broken in it at first. We had to cut his pants off to get to it; it was that badly swollen. He'd landed on his head so he had a pretty bad concussion and cracked his skull a bit, but that reduced well within a couple of days and his brain checks out fine. Because of it, however, he was in a coma for a bit over four days," Carson continued as he scanned the rest of John's team. "Once we got some blood work in, we discovered he had also picked up some kind of intestinal parasite. Not something that would kill him, but it would have made him bloody uncomfortable."

The scans done, Carson led the way to the back of the infirmary. "The parasite and other factors led to a rather high temperature, so we've been pumping him full of fluids as well as antibiotics and broad-spectrum antiparasitical agents. The few times he's woken he's been delirious and panicked, so I've kept him under mild sedation, enough to make him want to sleep most of the time, which was good for him -- I don't know how much sleep he'd been getting but I'd wager not much. Edith informed me that he woke last night during her shift and seemed lucid, if very confused. She managed to get him to drink some water and he held it down, which is a good sign. I'd like to wake him to make sure there're no other problems relating to the concussion. It would probably be for the best if he saw all of you, his team, when I did. I don't know how 'here' he's going to be."

"But we don't know anything about him," Radek said, following the party. "We don't know why he was so badly hurt, or what he was doing before he came to our reality."

"You're sure it's this alternate universe thing?" John demanded, keeping his voice low. They were at the back of the infirmary, and he heard monitors beeping reassuringly.

"Oh, yes, I ran some diagnostics on the DHD at the Alpha Site." Radek rubbed his eyes under his glasses. "There was a massive power surge which I must assume coincided with his arrival. It may have turned the 'gate into a sort of quantum mirror. But without talking to him, I can't be certain."

"And I've run DNA scans on him as well," Carson confirmed. "He's truly Rodney, as miraculous as it seems."

At the back of the infirmary, the lighting was dimmer, seemed less harsh, friendlier, and the curtains around the bed in the corner created the illusion of a private room. John pushed them out of the way and saw Rodney.

He looked like shit; his eyes were sunken and ringed with bruises, his hair wild and unkempt, his body far too thin. There were bags hanging from an IV and an oxygen cannula under his nose. But he was Rodney, really was, and John gave brief thought to passing out in relief.

"Rodney?" he whispered.
There was a chair next to the bed and John sat in it, barely aware he was doing so. Hesitantly, he picked up Rodney's hand, half expecting it to be cold and unresponsive; he was so goddamned relieved to find it warm and alive he could have cried.

Carson went to the other side of the bed and examined the various monitors and IVs. "He's doing quite well, by all accounts." He put the back of his hand on Rodney's forehead. "Fever's gone too. Rodney? Can you hear me, lad?"

Rodney took a deep breath and rolled his head to one side. "Jus' five more minutes..."

John chuckled and squeezed Rodney's hand. "C'mon, McKay, open those baby blues for me."

This time, Rodney frowned and twitched. His eyelids peeled apart slightly and he winced. "Major?"

Blinking, John shared a surprised look with Carson. "Uh, well, not exactly, but if you mean me, then yeah, I'm here."

Still frowning, Rodney kept trying to keep his eyes open. His words were slurred and breathy, but understandable. "What kind of twisted logic..." He trailed off and squeezed John's hand. "What..."

His breathing was picking up and Carson leaned over him, speaking softly. "Calm, my friend. You're safe, now."

"Carson?" John had never heard Rodney's voice sound so lost, not even when he was trapped at the bottom of the ocean. "Oh my God, Carson? You're... you're..." Rodney lifted his other hand to his face but stopped halfway, looking at the IV in the back of his hand in surprise. "What? Where am I? Sheppard said to keep the last bullet for me..."

"Rodney. It's okay." John pitched his voice low and squeezed Rodney's hand. Save the last bullet? What the hell had happened to the guy? "You're on Atlantis, you're safe."

"No, I can't be, I'm not, Atlantis was destroyed and oh my God, I'm dead. I'm dead aren't I? I'm dead and... and you're all..."

John heard Elizabeth sniff and saw her rub her eyes. Ronon snorted. "Yeah, that's McKay all right." John had to smile at the fond amusement in Ronon's voice.

"You're not dead, Rodney," Carson said, his voice trembling slightly. "Not any more, thank God. You're safe."

"I don't... I don't..."

"We found you at the Alpha Site," Elizabeth said. "You're in the infirmary in Atlantis, and you've been unconscious for more than a week while you healed." She patted Rodney's foot under the blanket. "How do you feel?"

Rodney's gaze was still skittering from face to face and his hand still trembled. "Confused," he murmured. "Atlantis is dead, Sumner blew her up with the ZedPM."


"Rodney, tell me, what is the last thing you remember?" Radek's voice was soft, but no less relieved.

"Radek?" Rodney's voice sounded so fragile it made John want to wrap him in bubble wrap and put
him away somewhere safe. "You're here too? I... I was dialing, I went to..." He looked up and his
eyes widened. "Ronon! We went to P3M-736, because you'd told Major Sheppard about the caches
of food and stuff and I left him in the cave, I didn't want to, he... you..." Rodney paused in
confusion. "I was bringing back food and medicine. Only there were Wraith. And a dart. It fired on
me -- or maybe the gate? -- as I went through..."

"Ah." Radek was almost bouncing on his toes. "A power surge. The DHD at the Alpha Site
registered such. It must have been just right combination to turn it into a quantum mirror, to bring
you here to us. A truly lucky shot."

"I don't believe in luck," Rodney murmured. "A quantum mirror? Then... Wait... this really is...?"

"Yes, Rodney, it really is Atlantis." John felt almost giddy. "And you're really alive. Really and
truly."

"Thank the Ancestors," Teyla whispered and John added one hell of an amen to that.

They wouldn't have been able to keep it a secret even had they wanted to -- and they didn't want to.
Rodney had died, had been mourned, and now he was alive again, hurt and fragile and not their
Rodney, except he was. People went around the city wearing stunned-bunny expressions, and John
thought he probably wore it too. Rodney was alive again.

Elizabeth told him an astronomer named Nigel Sharp had once said, *One of the standard problems
with the universe is that it's large enough that unlikely things happen pretty often.* Yeah, that
summed it up pretty well, John thought, on some level still afraid the whole thing was a dream.

For the first few days, Rodney was weak as a kitten and couldn't really stay awake for more than a
couple of hours at a time. Someone always stayed with him, even in the middle of the night, in case
he woke disoriented, panicked, had one of his frequent nightmares, anything. Mostly his team,
John, Ronon and Teyla, sat with him, but Radek and Elizabeth also alternated, and Lorne did too.
Radek told John most of the science staff were ready to help as well. John was the one there the
most frequently and no one thought to make any mention of that.

Carson let Rodney eat soft-solid food after three days. John had never seen Rodney so pathetically
happy to eat... and that said a lot, because Rodney loved food. Gradually, over the next week as
Rodney gained weight, strength and stamina, they talked, they compared notes, they learned about
each other. John noticed Rodney kept changing the subject at times; certain topics seemed too
painful for him. John simply filed those away for later prodding. He knew McKay would spill
eventually.

"We didn't wake the Wraith?" John said, trying to keep the facts straight.

"Well, yeah, about eight months ago. It was Ford..." Rodney's voice trailed off into sadness. "It
was just after we met Teyla on Athos."

"Then that means Sumner didn't die in your reality." John felt his world wobble underfoot. "And he
didn't kill me?"

Rodney snorted. "Well, at first it looked like he wanted to, but you came to like each other, I think.
He used to say you were useful because you were the only one able to keep me on a leash." Rodney
rolled his eyes and John grinned. "And of course, you..." He trailed off and looked down. John was
about to ask him to continue when he added. "He died on Atlantis, the last one out. I had tied our
last three naquadah generators together and set them to overload. All he had to do was keep the
Wraith there to be blown up with it.”

A lot of their conversations started with Rodney asking where certain people were, like, "Where's Peter?" meaning John had to explain how Grodin (or Dumais, or Gall) had died. Visitors would arrive and Rodney would look at them in shock, like he was seeing a ghost and every time he saw Elizabeth for the first week, he looked like he wanted to cry. After he hesitantly told John what had happened to her, John felt like he wanted to cry.

Rodney was still a little uncertain around Ronon and Teyla, and when John asked who was on his team, he seemed shocked. "My team? What are you talking about?"

"'Gate team." John blinked in surprise. "You weren't on my 'gate team?"

"No! Of course I wasn't-- you mean I was? Here? Why?"

A very confusing conversation followed. Rodney hadn't been on any team, hadn't gone off-world very much at all, in fact, and questioned why he would want to in the first place.

"Because you're the best we've got, McKay!" John said, still a little boggled. "I don't know how many times you saved our asses off-world... well, okay, you've also gotten us into trouble--"

"Oh, now that can't be true, the saving asses thing, yes, I can see that, but seriously--"

"No, you and your big mouth, so many times--"

"Please! I'm sure you were doing your usual flirting with everything that moved and you can't tell me that didn't get you--"

"Again with the flirting! McKay, you live in a fantasy world--"

Elizabeth and Teyla came around the partially-pulled curtain, interrupting them. Teyla had the biggest smile John had ever seen on her face and Elizabeth looked caught between laughing and crying. "It sounds like things are back to normal here," she said.

"You put me on a 'gate team?" Rodney demanded. "Elizabeth, why?"

Elizabeth laughed, but it was a thick sound and her eyes were bright. "Because my head of military insisted I do so, Rodney. Best decision I was ever forced into, I think."

John knew just how she felt.

"We come with news," Teyla said before anyone else could speak. "We have just heard from Stargate Command. The Daedalus left for Atlantis five days ago. They have confirmed that Jeannie is aboard."


"Yes, Rodney, your Jeannie." John stretched back in his chair. "And I can hardly believe you're related; after all, she's a very nice lady... Meredith."

"You met...?" Rodney looked between the three of them, apparently missing John's use of his real name. "You all met Jeannie? And she's coming here? Jeannie is?"

"She wouldn't sign the nondisclosure agreement at first," Elizabeth said. "But she has now. It'll only be her; they wouldn't let your niece come out. Oh, and all your effects are coming back, too; I'm led to believe they were never beamed down from the Daedalus. They should arrive in ten
John couldn't help it... he started laughing. After a moment, Rodney joined him.

Within a week of John's return to Atlantis, Rodney seemed to be doing just fine health-wise, better than fine, even. Carson allowed him the use of a laptop, though Rodney didn't seem to be working as much as he was reading -- their mission reports, John was pretty sure. He seemed well enough, in fact, to be released to his quarters. John asked Carson about why he hadn't one morning.

"Aye, he's well enough." Carson sighed. "I believe he doesn't want to leave."

John blinked in surprise. "Rodney doesn't want to leave the infirmary." He gave Carson a skeptical look. "You do realize who we're talking about here."

Carson gave him a stern glare. "Yes, John, I do know who we're speaking of -- Rodney McKay, who has been badly injured, in shock, malnourished, dehydrated, seen all his friends die..."

Sighing, John raised his hands. "Okay, you're right, I'm sorry it's just..." He ran his hand through his hair. "It's Rodney. It's hard to remember he's not--"

"Our Rodney." Carson put one hand on John's shoulder. "Kate's been working with him. It's pretty clear to me he's suffering from PTSD and survivor guilt, something I believe you have experience with as well."

Oh. "Oh. Uh, yeah." He hadn't really thought of that one.

A nurse called Carson aside so John wandered to the back of the infirmary where Rodney's bed was. The curtains made it as private as possible, though they were rarely closed all the way. Rodney had been using the infirmary's shower but still dressed in scrubs... John wondered if that was another symptom of him not wanting to leave. Surely they could find some clothes for him. John stopped when he heard murmured voices.

"But I left him. I promised I would come back..."

"Rodney, from what you've told me, he wasn't there to go back to. That was Kate Heightmeyer, and John thought he really should just turn around and leave, come back later. He didn't want to eavesdrop on what was clearly a private conversation... so why was he lingering?"

"I... but I never..."

"It's true, you didn't see a body. But there were Wraith on the planet, you said so yourself. And smoke coming from the direction of the cave."

"Yeah, and he said he was... was going to take them out. He looked like a damn suicide bomber, wrapped in C4."

"From your description of it, Carson believes his wound was badly infected. Even if you had returned in time, he might have died, Rodney."

"But what if he didn't? What if he's... still there, waiting for me?" Rodney sounded so lost and filled with pain it made John's heart ache. "He taught me, you know, never leave a man behind. Even if all you can do is bury him, don't leave him behind. That's Major Sheppard's motto. What if
"There's no going back now, Rodney. If Major Sheppard were alive -- which seems doubtful -- there is nothing you can do about it any longer. I know it sounds callous, or even cruel, but you have to find a way to forgive..." Without waiting for Heightmeyer's next words, John turned and fled.

He didn't get far, just to the mess hall, before he made himself stop. He walked into the room -- nearly empty between lunch and dinner -- got himself a cup of coffee, sat down, took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down, to start thinking. Forced himself to think about his feelings.

Rodney McKay was a royal pain in the ass. At times. And he was a lifesaver, someone who could pull a solution out of his ass better than anyone else alive, and that included Colonel Carter. When Rodney had died, a part of John had wondered why he was so massively upset -- sure, Rodney was on his team, was a... was a...

John sat up straight and blinked. Rodney was -- had been -- just about the best friend he had on Atlantis. Son of a bitch, he thought to himself. How the hell had that happened?

After the deaths of his friends, after his discipline and transfer to a remote place (to rot, he knew it, he just didn't like to think it), John had decided having close friendships was not all it was cracked up to be. Family left, friends died or left, even marriages and love affairs ended. He always was a loner, had never denied it or wished it otherwise, so having only 'surface' friends seemed fine, better than fine. Then Atlantis came along, and suddenly he had a family he'd never expected and friends who just crawled inside him and set up housekeeping. Like McKay had.

When he'd asked Jeannie whether McKay was bisexual, he thought he was only doing it to find out why Rodney had said he loved him before he died. John wasn't exactly straight, but he wasn't exactly open about it either. The last time he had admitted he liked guys about as much (or maybe more) than women, it had cost him his marriage. Admitting it now might cost him his career, and he didn't think he was ready to risk that. At the time, he thought it didn't matter. Rodney was dead. It was too late for anything but regrets.

Then Rodney came back. Was it karma or something, that John had a second chance to do the right thing? Or was it the right thing? There was no denying John was attracted to Rodney, emotionally and physically, though Rodney wasn't his type. Sort of. And maybe this Rodney wasn't bisexual or even interested in John. How could he tell? Should he try to broach the subject? The thoughts and questions chased themselves around in his head until he leaned forward to rest it on the table before him, groaning softly. Feelings sucked.

His head was still on the table when someone took the seat opposite him. He sat back up and looked into Teyla's (sympathetic, amused) eyes and smiled weakly. The woman was absolutely psychic, he could swear it, always showing up when he least wanted her (and her damnable insight) around. "Hi," he said, quietly.

"Hello." After a long pause, she added, "Is everything all right, John?"

He half-shrugged. Of course, I only bang my head on a table when I'm happy. "Yeah. Sure. Why?"

"It is just that you normally spend this time with Rodney; I am surprised to see you here."

"He's with Heightmeyer, I didn't want to interrupt."

"Ah."
His coffee was probably stone cold but he couldn't bring himself to go get another. Too much work.

"You seem distracted."

John looked up to see Teyla regarding him with the look he'd categorized as Number Fourteen-A: Are You Completely Brainless or Merely a Male? He considered it her most humiliating one and he hated it, especially since he was so often on the receiving end of it. "Well... okay. Yeah. I am. I guess."

"About Rodney."

He didn't dare roll his eyes; doing so would mean more bruises than he'd like to count the next time they ' sparred.' "I guess I just... I guess it never really sank in, that he was Rodney, but not..."

"But not the Rodney we have known all along. Yes." She sighed. "He has been through much, John."

"Yeah. I just got told off by Carson... words to that effect."

"I believe he has also not told us everything about what happened to him."

John blinked. "He hasn't?" He frowned; now that he thought about it, Rodney had only sketched in the basics, he'd glossed over a lot. The overheard conversation came back to him and he realized Rodney never said how -- or even if -- his Sheppard had died, though he clearly had.

"His physical state did not happen overnight. Carson has said it would have to have been weeks of deprivation."

"He's said something like a month, but you're right, he hasn't gone into details. At least, not with me." He looked at her expectantly.

"We are re-learning each other," she said, in response to his look. "I still carry a burden of guilt over our Rodney's death; someday soon, I would like to tell him what happened, hopefully gain his forgiveness."

"Teyla." John frowned. "We've been over this. It wasn't your fault."

She looked at him sadly. "He would not have gone to Michael had I not asked him, John. It is something I will carry in my heart forever."

John wanted to disagree, but he recognized how she felt. It was the same way he felt about the situation. Grumpy that he couldn't really counter her argument, he subsided.

"I have told him about his memorial service and have given him a copy of the recording. He seemed..." She paused and sighed, shaking her head. "He seemed very surprised that so many would mourn his passing."

"Yeah, that sounds like McKay." Then her words sunk in and John straightened in his chair. "Wait. You gave him a copy of the memorial service? I mean, with what I said... it could be... I mean, he might think that..."

"John." Now her expression carried quite a bit of steel, as did her voice. "Normally, I would not say this to anyone, no matter how close I am to such person. However, I grow tired of... I believe the phrase is 'dancing around the subject.'" She leaned forward, across the table, holding his gaze.
"Your feelings for Rodney McKay go deeper than that of a teammate or even a friend. It is time you acknowledged that."

With that, Teyla stood and walked out of the mess hall, leaving John rooted to his chair, stunned.

John ended up not even touching the coffee.

When he went back to the infirmary, he found Rodney sitting up on his bed, laptop in front of him and coffee next to it. Upon seeing John, Rodney accused, "You called me a jerk!" He was nearly quivering with indignation.

Refusing to be baited, John sat on the chair always by Rodney's bed. "Yes, I did, because -- surprise! -- you are at times, Rodney. And you know it."

"And this whole team thing, you let me get injured! Repeatedly!"

"I let you...? Oh come on, you didn't get hurt that much."

"Did so!"

"Did not! Tell me one time."

Rodney pursed his lips together for an instant before blurting, "P72-009!"

John tried to think back; there was something about that planet...

"The one with the Wraith girl. I could have been killed!"

"Wait a minute..." It was John's turn to glare. "You got a fucking splinter, McKay! I turned into a goddamned bug!"

Rodney paled. "And that's another thing! Since when do you take so many fucking risks? Are you trying to get yourself killed? Flying into a hive ship with a nuke?! Detonating a naquadah generator from high orbit?! Are you nuts?"

John almost shouted back but at the last minute, he realized how hard Rodney's hands were shaking. He deflated, fast. "McKay?" Rodney looked away, turning his focus back on the laptop. "Rodney. What happened?"

It took him a while to answer, and when he did, John noticed his voice was shaking too, just slightly. "I've been reading... the mission reports. Everything I -- he -- I went on. And my own personal journal -- seems passwords cross universes." He still wouldn't look at John. When he continued, his voice was softer but no less hesitant. "I'm not the man you think I am, Colonel. I'm not that Rodney. I don't know how you could think I was. I couldn't..."

John just looked at Rodney, wondered how the hell he was going to deal with that. He opened his mouth and closed it, several times, looking for the right words. Dammit, words were not his thing, they were Rodney's, but he had to say something.

Finally he settled for, "Look. McKay. Tell me about... you know, how all this happened. I... died, didn't I? Your Sheppard in your universe. Tell me what happened. From when it all started going south."

Rodney slumped. "Kate said I should," he murmured.
"I'm here to listen." John put as much sincerity into his voice as he could; he didn't like this oddly hesitant Rodney and really wanted his annoying, obnoxious, constantly talking friend back. The brief glimpses he'd gotten over the last week merely whetted his appetite. "You've already told me the Wraith woke for you about eight months ago."

Sighing, Rodney said, "Yeah. About that. I lost track of time, it could have been a little more." He still wouldn't look at John. "Your team went to Athos, the Genii had referred us to them, told us to talk to Teyla."

"The Genii? You're kidding, right?"

Rodney frowned at him. "No, I'm not. We have a-- had a treaty with the Genii, Elizabeth and Sumner brokered it, they'd even helped us during the storm. Zelenka and I went there frequently, helping with their atomics program and trying to educate the boneheads about proper shielding. I saw your report but I don't think I've even seen this Kolya joker."

"Huh." Now, that was an eye-opener. "Sorry. Go ahead."

Huffing a sigh, Rodney continued. At least his head was up, even if he still wouldn't look directly at John. "It was just after the Daedalus arrived, with Jackson and a ZedPM. You went with your team and met the Athosians and negotiated a treaty. Most of us thought you also got Teyla," Rodney's mouth curved into a little, bitter smile at that and John wondered why, "because she came back with you and within a week, she and Elizabeth and Jackson were thick as thieves. The most I remember about it was the translation of the database just went forward in leaps and bounds, we were finding stuff..."

He sighed again. "Never mind. The Athosian kids started taking classes in the city with the Genii kids, little terrorists running around getting into everything. Then Ford went back to Athos, and when he came back, he reported the 'mysterious ruins' halfway around the planet from the main Athosian camp. Jackson nearly had a panic attack before Elizabeth said he could go. Ford's team, with Jackson and Parrish and another one of the soft-science crowd, I don't remember who, went with Teyla to investigate, even though she thought it was too dangerous. Her stories about the Wraith -- well, everyone thought they were just that, stories. The Genii said the same thing, said that their atomics program was to help combat the Wraith when they 'woke' again. We just... We didn't really believe it."

"Until you woke them."

"Yeah. Until Ford woke them, investigating the ruins, which turned out to be a hive ship. They shot the 'jumper down but not until they were almost at the 'gate. You and Sumner went through, with a bunch of marines, got Ford, Jackson, Teyla... pretty much everybody, including most of the Athosians, back to the city. God, the Genii were pissed."

"Yeah, they were here too." John shook his head -- talk about feeling guilty. If he lived to be a million he wouldn't be able to shake the guilt from having woken the Wraith.

Rodney nodded. "Thing was, they got a couple of Marines. Teyla and Ladon kept telling us that we were compromised, that once a Wraith got you, ate you, it would have all your memories and anything you knew it would know." John blinked -- he didn't think that was the case, was it? He filed that tidbit away for later thought as Rodney continued. "They kept telling us and we kept assuring them we were safe, because we didn't understand and just... just discounted it. Outer space vampires with bad skin! Ridiculous. The Wraith were bad, maybe, but we were in Atlantis, we were safe. But we were all sitting ducks. Just sitting, stupid ducks."
Rodney was silent for so long John finally spoke up. "What happened? Did they attack?"

After another minute, Rodney said, "Eventually. First they scouted us. We didn't understand the beaming technology they had, we had no idea they could actually transport Wraith into the city. Elizabeth was still thinking in terms of negotiation. Sumner had a better clue, but it wasn't until they began... hunting us that we understood." He visibly swallowed. "One came after me. Ford... he got in the way."

John closed his eyes. Poor Ford.

"Once we got them all cleared out and had the shield up, we started sending personnel back through the 'gate to Earth. Everyone we could, we just left a skeleton crew." Rodney's voice had degenerated into a soft monotone. "Elizabeth, Jackson, Zelenka and I, we were frantically copying the database, as much as we could, as fast as we could, because we knew by then that there was no hope, no reason for us to stay. The Genii and the Athosians asked for permission to resettle in the Milky Way and the SGC and IOA allowed it. I set the ZedPM to overload once we were gone, but we didn't make it out."

John leaned forward, wondering if he should touch Rodney, ground him from his memories.

"Thirty-seven hive ships. Thirty-seven. Even the Genii were stunned at the number. They started bombarding us immediately, and the ZedPM couldn't keep up. We thought if we dropped the shield to just the command tower, dialed Earth, set the self-destruct... we thought if we did that, we could escape. Except the shield collapsed before I'd thought it would. They broke into the tower in what felt like seconds -- we turned around and there they were. Sumner had said, save your last bullet for yourself, better to die than to give them the coordinates to Earth and Simpson... I saw her... We got into 'jumpers, we ran for it, but the wounded... Teyla died getting Elizabeth into the last 'jumper, ours. The last I saw of Sumner he had a P90 in each hand and was covering our departure, defending the DHD. I know we took as many as we could with us but it wasn't... probably wasn't enough. Three naquadah generators on full overload, and it probably wasn't enough. But the ZedPM was gone."

To hell with propriety. John stood, shoved the bed table aside, perched on the edge of Rodney's bed and put his hand on his shoulder. "Rodney. How long were you going, running from...?"

"I don't really know, I lost track of time, 'gating from planet to planet. Carson kept Elizabeth alive for a long time, a month or so, but I told you that."

"Yeah. How did... I mean, your Major Sheppard. He died, didn't he? How?"

"I don't know. I wasn't there. He made me go on alone. He'd gotten pretty torn up on... on... P22-304. I think. We tried to fight them and didn't do very well. Shrapnel." Rodney was very slightly leaning into John. "It got infected. He couldn't walk well, so he set booby-traps, made himself a vest out of C4, told me to go alone, find food, medicine, come back. I was coming back to him but there were Wraith, smoke from the cave..."

John swallowed around a lump in his throat. "If there were Wraith... then he was dead."

Rodney's muscles tensed under John's touch. "But I didn't. Go. Back!" he gritted out from between clenched teeth. "I left him there, I knew I shouldn't have left him there, alone, that's not what we--"

"Stop. It's all right."

"No it isn't! It isn't fucking right! You asshole! Why did you -- he -- I should have gone back!"
"Rodney. He's me. He was me. Right? Just like you're... you, you're Rodney, not some evil, goatee-wearing twin. So I'm telling you right now, you did the right thing." Rodney opened his mouth again but John squeezed and gently shook the shoulder he still held in his hand. "No. Listen to me. You did."

Rodney finally looked up, looked into John's eyes. There was a lot of emotion in those eyes, most of which John couldn't decipher, but a lot of what he could was pain. It made John want to pull Rodney into an embrace, to hold him and soothe him and...

And kiss him.

More than that -- suddenly, John wanted to know if Rodney and his Sheppard were lovers, were more than John had known was possible with Rodney. He wanted to know and also knew that he couldn't ask, would never be able to ask. Which was high up on his list of things that sucked, but John Sheppard was that much of a coward where it counted.

So instead, he settled for an enigmatic (he hoped it was enigmatic) look while he released Rodney's shoulder and gently sat back down in his chair. Rodney followed John with his eyes but didn't say anything else for a long minute. When he did speak, he was calmer. "Tell me what happened to me, here. How did I die? I watched the recording from the memorial service, but no one will tell me more about it."

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. "Well, there's pretty good reason not to." John took a deep breath and ran his hands through his hair before launching into the long, sordid mess of the Michael project. He didn't sugar-coat it or make excuses for it, just laid it out, dispassionately. Rodney listened and his eyes grew wider nearly at every word.

When he'd finished, Rodney just sat and looked at him, obviously incredulous. "That's insane."

"Well..."

"No, I mean that in the most sincere way possible. Who was the brain-dead moron who thought up that project? I've seen the Wraith, I watched them feed on Ford and... and..."

John sighed. "Yes. It was a crazy idea. And we paid for it." He closed his eyes, still seeing wizened, aged Rodney. "And then some."

A few moments later, Rodney said, "Is that why Teyla is always hanging around? She feels guilty?"

"Well, she feels guilty, yeah, but... Rodney, despite the fact that you're not... the same Rodney we've known, you're still our teammate. Believe it or not, we care about you. Not," he hastened to add, "that we'll ever admit it to anyone but, yeah."

Rodney rolled his eyes. "I still can't figure out why I'd be considered a good member of any away-team..."

It was John's turn to roll his eyes. "Please. You just finished telling me what the last few months of your life were like. You still think you're not up to it?"

Rodney blinked at him and didn't answer, but John could tell he was thinking about it. "Listen. Carson said you can leave, so let's go to the mess hall, I'll let you buy me dinner. You can even go home, after."

"I don't have one any more," Rodney said, turning back to the laptop.
"Yeah, you do. It's pretty empty, but your stupid, rock-hard bed is there. We can get you clothes and stuff until your things come back next week. Using your own shower has gotta be better than using the infirmary's."

"Well..." With a 'humph,' Rodney pushed the table further away. "Okay. What's in the line for tonight?"

"I don't know. Let's go find out." As Rodney scooted to the side of the bed and stood, he added, "Hey, maybe they've got lemon chicken tonight."

The glare he received in return was a thing of beauty.

Carson was only too happy to let Rodney out of the infirmary for dinner. While Rodney put some slippers on and used the head, John radioed Lorne and asked him to prep Rodney's old room again - sheets, pillows, some toiletries and anything else he might need. Lorne sounded so happy at the idea John was almost alarmed -- but he knew Lorne wouldn't take it too far over the top. He'd missed McKay too.

They got to the mess hall early for dinner, which was probably a good thing. Everybody noticed Rodney, right down to the cooks and busboys. It was almost -- but not quite -- embarrassing, except Rodney wasn't eating it up like John would have expected. He seemed almost shy, answering people's hellos with short, one or two word replies.

It wasn't until Radek sat down with them that Rodney really began to open up. Radek was a sneaky bastard and knew Rodney even better than John did, knew what buttons to push and how to get a response. He started off by giving Rodney a rundown of the current projects and how they were progressing. Before fifteen minutes had passed, Rodney was all but yelling at Radek, who happily yelled back. John sat back in his chair, listening with a wide grin plastered on his face.

Teyla joined them and he was amused to see the same grin on her face. "It is good to see Rodney enjoying himself," she murmured.

"I'm going to try and get him to go back to his room tonight," he replied, equally softly. "He hasn't had a nightmare in a couple of nights, I think a change of venue might do him good."

Teyla's grin morphed into a more thoughtful expression. "I am not certain that is wise, John," she said. "In the infirmary, he is surrounded by people but in his room, he would be surrounded by nothing more than himself and his memories."

John turned to her and frowned. "You don't think that's a good idea?"

Before they could speak more about it, Elizabeth and Lorne walked into the mess hall, both of them looking as smug as a cat stuffed with canary. They walked towards the crowd around the table, which had grown to include Simpson, Esposito, Dickenson and a few other science staff John knew only slightly. They were all talking at once and Rodney seemed to be in his element.

Elizabeth sat next to Teyla. "It's wonderful to see him out of the infirmary. Has he been like this all day?"

"No, but Radek knows how to push his buttons." John turned to Lorne, who was still smirking. "Okay, spill it."

"Nothing, sir, nothing at all." Lorne winked at Teyla who rolled her eyes. "Just finished taking care of Dr. McKay's quarters, with a little help from Dr. Weir."
John closed his eyes. "Do I want to know?"

"Nothing bad, John," Elizabeth said. "I'm going to get dinner before it's all gone."

Rodney stayed in the mess hall long after dinner and seemed to be having a good time. In fact, he seemed to be much like the 'old' Rodney, and John breathed a sigh of relief. He'd been through a lot and John knew it wouldn't go away instantly, but seeing Rodney so animated, so up gave him hope it wouldn't take very long.

Two hours after dinner, though, Rodney was definitely fading. John stood. "Okay, Cinderella, pumpkin time. You've got to remember you're fresh out of the infirmary. Carson would skin me alive if you passed out on me now."

"Oh." Rodney blinked up at him and yawned.

"Go, my friend," Radek said, patting Rodney's arm. "Stop by the labs tomorrow if you feel up to it. I promise I'll have a few of the more simian minions lined up for you to denigrate."

Rodney gave him an uncertain smile and stood. John had to grab his arm as he wobbled. "Whoa there, is your knee giving out on you?"

"I guess a... a little." With John's help, Rodney extricated himself from the table and chair and walked to the door, limping slightly.

"Knees are tricky things, Rodney. Be careful."

"Yes, thank you Ma-- Colonel, for your remarkable insight." The snark made John want to smile, though he repressed it.

At the junction of main corridors, Rodney paused, looking left towards the infirmary. "Why don't you give your room a try, first," John suggested. "You can always go back."

"Hm." Rodney wouldn't look at him again, and didn't move. "I suppose they could always use the bed in the infirmary," he said, almost under his breath.

"There you go. C'mon, McKay."

John walked with Rodney down the corridor towards the living quarters, amazed that Rodney was still silent, still thoughtful. They reached his door and John was expecting a testy dismissal, a sharp comment about how he could look after himself, thank you very much, but to his surprise, there was none. Rodney stood before the door without moving for a moment, then passed his hand over the sensor and walked into his room.

"What the...?"

John looked around in surprise. "Looks like Elizabeth's doing," he said. There were flannel sheets on the bed under a pretty blue blanket that was definitely not regulation issue. The gauzy curtains were very pretty, but what really caught their eyes were the pictures arrayed across the dresser, all in clear plastic frames.

Rodney walked to them and began picking them up, examining them. "Where were these-- wait. That's Jeannie. Isn't it?"

John joined him at the dresser and looked over his shoulder. "Yeah, it is, and that's Kaleb and Madison. Oh, I know what it was, Elizabeth, Teyla and Ronon went to her to find me. I was, uh..."
He rubbed the back of his neck. "Kind of... hiding. I guess."

"You were what?" Before John could try to evade the question, Rodney picked up another picture and spoke again. "Wait, that's Ronon. And my niece? And who's this kid with you?" he asked, pointing to yet another picture. What had Elizabeth done, print out everyone's memory cards?

"Oh, that's Jinto." John smiled at the picture; he had Jinto in kind of a headlock and heaps of other children were piling on top, all of them thoroughly grubby and laughing. "He's Athosian. They live on the mainland and I go over a lot, help out with stuff over there. Teyla is always drafting us to do this or that." He picked up another picture. "This one was from one of the Tendol Feasts. They're always fun and we always get pretty snockered on their beer and ruus wine." He chuckled. "Well, you and I do. Teyla knows better and Ronon could probably drink a full barrel of both without getting tipsy."

There was one picture of the four of them that John remembered well. Lorne had taken it; it was just before the Doranda debacle and just after Ronon had agreed to join the team. John had his arms around Rodney and Teyla, who were laughing, and Ronon was standing behind them, not quite glowering but not completely relaxed, either. It brought back some very good memories.

"This is so strange," Rodney murmured, staring at the picture. "So different from what... from where I came from." He backed up until he sat heavily on the bed, still holding the picture.

John grabbed the desk chair and turned it so he could straddle it backwards. There were a million questions he wanted to ask and couldn't. He settled for a hesitant, "Are you... glad to be here?"

Rodney frowned. "Well, I hardly think that matters now, right? I mean, I'm stuck here, and it certainly beats dying a lingering, painful death."

He didn't like that 'stuck here' but chose to ignore it. "I mean, do you think you could be... Happy? Content? Comfortable? "...You know, used to it? In time?"

Rodney was still staring at the picture in his hands. From the angle, all John could see of his face was his frown. Finally, he whispered, "I don't know. I'd like to."

It was better than nothing. John cleared his throat and stood. "Listen. I'll let you get some rest, you look pretty tired. You should have pretty much everything you need, I asked Lorne to get you set up. You going to be okay?"

"Yes, yes, quit hovering, I'm not fragile."

"Sir, yes sir," John said with a grin. "You yell if you need anything, okay?"

Rodney nodded and John left. Once the door closed behind him, he hesitated. What if Rodney had a nightmare? A flashback? Teyla was right, at least in the infirmary help was only steps away. Maybe John could get a marine to come by every... half hour or so. Or more. Or...

He touched his radio. "Sheppard to Zelenka, you there, Doc?"

"Yes, Zelenka here. What do you need, Colonel?"

"Is there a way to... I don't know, pipe ambient room noise from one person's quarters to another? I mean, I know there's the PA, but does it go both directions?"

Zelenka was quiet for a moment then said, "Ah. Yes. Consider it done."
In the middle of the night, it turned out to be a very good idea indeed.

The volume level wasn't very high, but it was sufficient to hear Rodney begin to thrash and moan, and the inarticulate yell came though clearly. John, who purposely slept in a t-shirt and sweats, just in case, was out his door so fast he wasn't even fully awake before he hit Rodney's room.

As he ran into the room, Rodney sat up in bed yelling, "Carson!" He was bathed in sweat.

John sat on the bed carefully; he'd had experience with dreamers and knew better than to startle Rodney out of sleep. "Rodney. McKay, come on, it's okay, it's only a dream."

Rodney threw one arm out in a defensive move, but John was ready with a block, still murmuring to him. Finally, Rodney visibly shook off the dream and looked around frantically. "Carson? Sheppard... what the hell...?"

"It's okay, it was just a dream. You're safe here on Atlantis. Remember?" John put one hand high on Rodney's shoulder, next to his carotid pulse. His heart was racing and he was panting.

"Sheppard?"

"Yeah, it's me, it's okay. It was just a dream."

Rodney swallowed and looked around, still pretty frantic. "It's... I..."

"Calm down, buddy, calm down. It's okay." John squeezed the shoulder under his hand and felt Rodney's pulse and breathing slow. He stood and went to the bathroom to get a washcloth damp with cold water, then returned and ran it over Rodney's face gently. "You okay?" He sat back down on the edge of the bed.

"Yeah, yeah, I guess." Rodney frowned at him. "How did you...?"

"I, uh... I asked Radek to feed audio from your room to mine." He winced. "Sorry. I was just... you know, concerned, in case you had a nightmare or something."

"You did?" Rodney blinked. "Oh. Well. Thank you."

John suddenly realized he was sitting close enough to Rodney to feel the heat from his body. He forced himself to stay still and savor it, not back off nervously. "You okay, now?"

"I think so." Rodney took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. "Sorry."

Blinking, John said, "For what?"

"For..." Rodney waved his hand around. "All this. Didn't mean to make trouble."

"Trouble?" John raised both eyebrows. "Why the hell would you think that? You've been through hell and back the last few months, I'd be more freaked out if you weren't freaking out."

Rodney snorted. "Yeah. Unlike you, Captain Heroic."

"Hey, that's Lieutenant Colonel Heroic to you," John replied with a smile.
Rodney didn't return it, though. "Sometimes," he whispered, "I think this is the dream, that I'll wake up just before a Wraith feeds on me. Sometimes, I can't tell if that's the dream or if this is."

In the darkness of Rodney's quarters, it was easier to be honest. "You... Earlier, you said you felt guilty about not going back for him, for Major Sheppard. Rodney, I've got to tell you, knowing you were safe, knowing I'd done my best to keep you safe, that's all, I mean, that's everything." He swallowed and looked away. "I think that's my biggest fear, not being able to keep my team safe. That's my job, and not being able to do it..." He shook his head. "He did everything I'd do. Well, of course he would because he's me, but... you know what I mean. I wouldn't have done anything different."

John made himself lift his head to look at Rodney and found himself being scrutinized. "You're so different, I mean, from recently," Rodney said, still in a whisper. "He kept trying to crack jokes, his usual double-entendre, half-flirting thing, act the way we always acted around each other and he couldn't. He hurt too much and I couldn't fix it."

"You got out," John replied, squeezing the shoulder under his hand again. "You got out and that's all I would have wanted. Anything else... anything else was gravy."

"I lost everything, and somehow got it all back." Rodney's voice took on a dream-like quality. "How did I manage to do that? I got everything back. Almost." His last word was interrupted by a huge yawn and they both chuckled.

"Go back to sleep, McKay. You've still got some healing to do."

"Guess so." He flopped back on his bed with a tired sigh. "I'm going to have to thank Elizabeth for these sheets. They're great. And I'm not giving them back." He yawned again, apparently half-asleep already.

John stood and smiled down at Rodney. "Do you want me to tuck you in?"

Rodney made a sleepy, rude noise. "Not unless you plan on join--" He cut the words off and his eyes flew open. John didn't move or make a sound, frozen in place. "S-sorry. Go back to bed, uh, Colonel. I'll be fine."

"Uh... yeah," John managed to get out before turning and getting out of Rodney's room so fast he probably left a sonic boom.

The worst part of it was how hot a sleepy, relaxed McKay was.

He was in so much trouble.

Rodney slept in his room from that point on, and after the third night in a row with no nightmares, John had Radek cancel the sound-surveillance. Teyla began working with Rodney in physical therapy, and though he complained loudly about it, he went and even grudgingly admitted it was helping. He was spending more and more time in the labs, though Radek told John it wasn't anywhere near full time. A Rodney voluntarily cutting back on his work hours was a new thing, and John couldn't decide if he liked it or not.

What was bad was Rodney avoiding John. It wasn't like John didn't see him -- Rodney came to the staff meetings, though he usually didn't contribute much, they would eat together at times, but Rodney wouldn't seek John's company and that hurt.

Three days before the Daedalus was due to arrive, John was caught by Elizabeth as she walked past...
his office. "John?"

He waved her in. "Just trying to get caught up," he lied, carefully hiding the SoDoKu puzzle book under some papers. Her look indicated she didn't really believe him, but as long as she didn't catch him at it, he wouldn't have to point out how many times he'd walked in on her playing solitaire.

"I wanted you to know that Rodney has told me he was thinking about returning to Earth on the Daedalus," she said and John's jaw dropped.

"He's what?"

She perched on the wobbly chair he kept in his closet of an office. "It makes sense, John. He's been through a lot and said he doesn't feel comfortable or even safe here any longer."

"No, that can't be right, he's been here..."

"He's not our Rodney, John." Her eyes were sad. "It's hard to remember that, but it's true. He's been hunted and seen friends die and I can't blame him for wanting to take the safe way out."

"Let me talk to him. Teyla and Ronon, the three of us, we can talk to him. He won't even have to go on away missions if he doesn't want to--"

"I won't let you pressure him into staying, John." Now her eyes were stern as well as sad. "He's an adult and knows what's best for himself. Don't force the issue."

"I'm not going to water-board him!" John put his hands up defensively. "I just think I can persuade him to stick around." Maybe. Hopefully. Though John really had no idea how to do that.

"Well, it's not like I don't want you to succeed, because I don't want to lose him. But be careful. Please." Elizabeth gave him one more motherly look and left.

John's first impulse was to run to find Rodney and shake him, yell at him, but he forced himself to stop. Elizabeth was right, the guy had been through a lot and he was an adult, with an adult's perspective on what he needed.

So John was just going to have to make sure he understood that what he needed was to stay on Atlantis. He'd be succinct, honest and up-front about it, he would tell Rodney how much he was needed, how much Rodney loved Atlantis and how much the city loved him, hell, he could even play dirty and pull the duty card. Mentally rehearsing various scripts in his head, he left his office.

Step one: find Rodney. The labs were the first choice, but Radek said he'd already been there and gone. That still bothered John, because a Rodney not interested in work was a Rodney he knew nothing about. Maybe John should add the whole Nobel prize thing too, because all the work Rodney had done would surely get him one of those and it might just jump-start him back to his usual multitasking personality.

The mess hall was empty and Rodney wasn't in the infirmary. The last place he expected Rodney to be was in his quarters, so that was just a quick stop on the way to a couple of the out-of-the-way labs on the east pier he knew Rodney liked to use. When Rodney opened the door to his chime, John was caught off guard, still mentally rehearsing what he would say. What came out, then, was, "Uh, hi."

"Oh, hi." Rodney blinked at John. He was wearing old, baggy sweats donated from someone and a loose, faded t-shirt. His hair was getting long but John kind of liked it that way.
"Can I come in?"

Rodney shrugged. "Okay." He stood back and John came into the room. The pictures were still on the dresser and there were two laptops on the desk, both on. Other than that, the room was still pretty barren. John hadn't even made it all the way in when Rodney added, "Did Elizabeth send you?"

He turned to Rodney in surprise, hearing the door shut behind him. "No! Well, sort of, she told me you want to go back to Earth." He shrugged and tried hard to look earnest and innocent. "You can't go, you need to stay. You know how much you love Atlantis and I know how much the city loves you."

Frowning, Rodney said, "Well, first off, I only said I was think--"

"What would we do around here without you anyway? Rodney, you know how important to the expedition you are, to all of us. You've saved our asses way more than anyone else, we need you."

"You... I..."

John could tell he was losing Rodney and that would never do. "If it's the whole away-team thing, we'll find a way to get by without you, until you feel comfortable, and even if you never do, that's okay too. We really need you here, Rodney, that's the whole thing." I need you, he added in his head.

Rodney's mouth was open and he was frowning, but no words came out.

Go for broke, John thought. "And... I mean, I..." Words were so not his thing. Frustrated by his inability to articulate his thoughts better, John just leaned in and kissed Rodney. He made it as good as he could, as gentle and as meaningful as he could, but he wasn't used to it, wasn't used to kissing guys. Guys were for mutual hand-jobs and the occasional furtive blowjob but not for kissing -- women were for kissing and gentleness. Rodney blew that idea out of the water the moment their lips touched: he discovered suddenly that he wanted to kiss Rodney, wanted to spend a long time kissing Rodney, in fact, because it was great and then some.

Problem was that Rodney didn't really respond. He didn't push John away, which was a good sign, but remained still. John pulled back and tried to keep his wince internal -- had he just blown it? He couldn't read the expression on Rodney's face as he spoke. "What the hell was that?"

"Um..." Okay, this wasn't good. "A kiss?"

"You're not gay. As you've informed me many times over the past couple of years, you are not gay and what the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Utterly confused, John reacted with his usual eloquence. "Huh?"

"It's been our 'standing joke,' how much I want in your pants and you're not gay. I don't know what you think you're playing at--"

"Wait. Wait, wait, wait." John lifted his hand. "Stop. I wouldn't have kissed you if I was straight and wait a minute, our what? Standing joke? McKay, we don't have--"

Rodney went pale. "Oh... I mean..."

"Listen. I've known since I was, I don't know, a teenager, I guess, that I like... you know, guys... as
much as, if not more than, girls. So no, I guess I'm not, you know, straight, I'm... I'm bi, I guess...
But Rodney, I wanted to fly. Where I'm from, wanting to fly meant the military was pretty much my only option, and they don't like, you know, guys who like guys more than girls." He ran his hands over his head, scratching his scalp. "And do you mean I -- I mean, the other me -- teased you with it? Ragged on you? That's just not cool."

Completely flustered, Rodney took a step back and waved his hands. "It wasn't, I mean, it wasn't cruel or anything, just our... you're bi? Seriously?"

"I wouldn't joke about that, McKay." Especially since I don't come out to people as a rule, he added mentally.

Rodney seemed completely floored, like his entire world-view had shifted. Before he could censor himself further, John blurted, "I asked Jeannie. If you were, you know, bi. Because when you... died... you told me, you said you loved me, then you apologized. I wasn't sure if you meant 'love' love, or if you were... I mean, something else? I never thought I had a chance, Rodney, never thought I should try. Well, okay," he conceded, amazed he was still talking about feelings for Christ's sake, "I didn't really understand how much you... I mean, you're the closest thing..."


_Oh, thank God_ John said to himself just before he opened his mouth and went for it. Rodney's mouth tasted hot and sweet and he kissed John with a passion John would never have expected, not from Rodney, anyway. John buried his hands in Rodney's hair and they dueled for control of the kiss; neither of them winning, except they both were.

Rodney pressed John up against the wall and he realized being there made it loads easier to intensify the kiss; so he angled his head to get the kiss even deeper, sloppier, hotter. Rodney seemed ready to take up residence in John's mouth and John was more than happy to let him. When he pressed his leg between John's, John moaned, turned his head away and panted; it felt so good...

Rodney apparently was okay with that, as he attacked John's neck instead, nipping and licking. "God, you're hot," he panted. "I've wanted this for so damn long..."

"Should have said something," John gasped back, dropping his hands to grip Rodney's hips, closing his eyes to better feel Rodney's lips and teeth, teasing, caressing John's touch-starved skin. This whole kissing men thing wasn't nearly as bad as John had thought; a bit of stubble under his lips just made it all the more sensual, for some damn reason. It helped that Rodney was one hell of a good kisser. Who knew?

"I did!" Rodney pulled back and John dropped his head and opened his eyes. "I made a pass at you before we left Antarctica, you were the hottest thing I'd ever seen, I wanted you so badly..."

John lifted his arms back to Rodney's head, tilted it until they could touch foreheads. "If you had, if you had _here_, I..."

"Would you have said yes?"

Wanting more than anything else to say yes, John suddenly realized he couldn't. He wouldn't lie to Rodney, not in this way. "I don't know," he said, his voice harsh and soft. "I don't know. I'm the king of repression, Rodney, a bi man whose gaydar is for shit and who's too afraid to ask, too afraid to risk."

"Then why now? What's different?" Rodney's voice was demanding and his eyes were begging
John for an answer.

Well, at least this was easy. "Because I lost you." He could admit this, even if it was hard to speak around the lump in his throat. "Because you died and I realized just how important you are to me and it was too late, I thought I'd never have another chance."

Rodney's expression was stricken and heartbreaking. "I thought I'd lost everything, even you. You turned me down, so gently, told me you wanted to be friends, didn't want to lose that friendship. I thought that was enough, that the wanting, the needing... that being friends would be enough."

"I never allowed myself to want," John admitted. "I couldn't, not and risk losing my career, my friendship with you, everything, if that want wasn't returned."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Rodney whispered, and John understood -- he was talking to the 'other' Sheppard, Major Sheppard, Rodney's Sheppard.

"Maybe he didn't know, or wouldn't let himself know." John's voice was also a whisper. "I don't know. I--"

The alarm cut into their conversation and John let his head thunk back against the wall behind him. "Not now!" he groaned.

"Colonel Sheppard to the command room, on the double!" At the PA's announcement, John touched his radio. "This is Sheppard, report!" Rodney backed away slightly. His eyes were dazed, his too-long hair mussed, his lips swollen and red and there were spots of color high on his cheeks. He looked like a man who'd been doing some heavy making out and John wanted nothing more than to get back to where they'd been.

"Sir! SGA-fourteen reports Wraith at their location and are requesting backup and emergency extraction."

John shared a wide-eyed look with Rodney. "Copy that. Teyla! Ronon! Gear up and meet me in the 'jumper bay in five. Lorne, have two Marine duty units ready to ship out." John keyed his radio off and looked at Rodney. "You okay?"

"Do I need to come with you?" Rodney asked and John's heart melted a little. Rodney looked terrified and resolute, ready to go even though he thought he wasn't up to it.

"No, but I need you in Command running ops backup. Can you?"

"I can do that."

"And when we get back," John started, but Rodney cut him off with a hard, fast kiss and said, "We'll pick this up again. So you'd better get your ass back in one piece."

"Sir, yes sir," John replied with a smile, even as he turned and ran out the door.

"Are you sure you're all right?"

"Rodney, I assure you, I am fine." Teyla smiled up at Rodney, who was just hovering enough to drive them all crazy.

"But your ankle, it's easy to re-break something when you put too much stress on it too soon--"

"Rodney, quit dithering." Carson smiled even as he rolled his eyes. "Teyla's fine. According to your
scans, you're as perfect inside as you are out, love. Go on with you now, shoo, the lot of you. Get some rest."

John grinned back at Carson. Extraction complete, no deaths, one injury -- a badly scraped arm on a marine who didn't catch himself fast enough -- a good mission. The best kind, in fact. "You heard the man, fun time's over."

Ronon clapped John on the back and left, probably for a run -- John knew he often had excess energy to get rid of after adrenaline-fueled missions. John usually did too, but he planned on losing that excess in a far more entertaining way than running.

They walked Teyla to the door and waved as she went left to her quarters, while they went right, towards Rodney's room. John's doubt grew with every step, though, wondering if this was the right thing for him to do. The right thing, the right time, all of it... he didn't do relationships very well and he had a sneaking suspicion that this one would be the most important one of his life. He couldn't fuck it up.

His hesitancy must have shown because Rodney stopped before opening the door to his room. "If you don't--" He was frowning.

"No. I do." John took a deep breath and bit his lip. "I don't want to... I mean..." He sighed. "Rodney, I'm not good at this whole thing, being... you know... together."

It might have been wry, but at least it was a smile on Rodney's face. "You're telling me? I know that, moron. C'mon."

As the door closed behind them, John caught Rodney's arm and he pulled it, gently. He could do kissing, even though it felt weird to kiss a guy. So that's what he started with, kissing, lips and tongue and a hint of teeth until he was hard and panting, until Rodney was clearly just as turned on as John was.

This time, nothing would stop them. John ran his hands up under Rodney's t-shirt to find out if his skin was as soft as his lips, and wasn't too surprised to find that it was. Rodney was still a little too skinny, but John (and Teyla) had made it their mission in life to get him back in shape. In better shape than ever, actually, and even though Rodney protested the work, John thought he was really getting into it.

Not to be outdone, Rodney pulled John's jacket off and left it in a heap on the floor, then tugged John's t-shirt out and ran his hands over John's back. They were still kissing and the tantalizing feel of skin left John hungry for more. Between the two of them, they managed to get both t-shirts off without ripping them, though it was a close thing. And that was better -- skin on skin was so much better and John wondered what it was going to be like when they got to naked. He really wanted to find out.

"Shoes," he mumbled, not wanting to lift his mouth from Rodney's.

"Yeah."

John felt Rodney toe off his shoes, which was when he remembered he was wearing combat boots. "Crap," he said, letting his mouth explore Rodney's neck. "Boots. Gotta... gotta..."

"C'mere." Rodney tugged and pushed until they were at the bed, where one hard push landed John on it. "Off, now," Rodney demanded, pointing to the boots while he yanked his socks off and untied the waistband of the sweats.
Grinning, John hurried up and wrenched off the boots, which took his socks too, then stood to unbutton and unzip his BDUs. Boxer shorts to boxer shorts was better than topless, and John pressed his hand against the erection tenting Rodney's, making him hiss.

"God, I want you," Rodney murmured, looking at him like John was a huge bar of special dark chocolate. "For so long..."

"Me too," John said, wrapping one arm around Rodney's waist and tugging their bodies together again so they could kiss some more.


"Pushy bastard." John grinned but sat on the bed.

Rodney all but tackled him down so he was lying on top of John. "Damn straight. Get those boxers off now."

It was rather difficult to follow that order since Rodney immediately latched onto John's mouth with his own, but they managed, squirming and groaning as their cocks touched each other. John grabbed Rodney's ass and pulled them even closer, more tightly together and the friction was so fucking fantastic he realized he was seconds from coming, just from this.

"Wait, wait," Rodney gasped, after lifting his head again. "I'm... I'm almost..."

"Yeah, me too," John moaned. "Rodney..."

"No, not like this..." Rodney licked a stripe up John's neck then delicately kissed the Iratus bug scar. "I want you... need to be, can we... can I fuck you? Let me, oh, please let me..."

John felt a surge go through him, a combination of fear and excitement. Yeah, he'd played around with his ass, had pushed his fingers inside himself, but he'd never had another man like that. Sure, blowjobs and handjobs and on one memorable occasion, a girlfriend had used a slender toy on him. But anal sex?

"Yeah, yeah, do it." Apparently John's brain had other ideas.

His acceptance apparently ratcheted Rodney's arousal even higher, because the guy was almost vibrating with excitement. Before John could take a breath, there was lube and one of Rodney's thick, competent fingers teasing his hole, pressing gently inside. And it hurt, just a little, but John took a deep breath and told his muscles to quit it already and relax.

It helped that Rodney was being extremely gentle, hesitant even, dropping kisses on every patch of skin he could get to, while his other hand alternated playing with John's nipples or tugging gently on his balls. When Rodney found his prostate, John tensed and held a shout back behind gritted teeth.

"Yeah, like that," Rodney said, his voice hoarse and soft. He took the one finger out and John immediately missed it, but it didn't matter, because he was back with two. And yeah, that hurt a little more, but it felt good too.

"More," John demanded, once again consciously relaxing his muscles.

"Hang on, I don't want to hurt... you're tight, so fucking tight... just, just wait..." He pulled out and after a second, pushed back in with more lube.
"I'm fine, just do it..."

"No, you're not... how long has it been since you..."

"Now Rodney, Christ, now, please..."

"Just a minute!"

Rodney's two fingers were pulled out and three tried to push back in and yeah, that hurt worse. "So fucking tight! Just... just relax." Rodney caressed John's belly and gave his wilting cock a few pulls. "Going to make it good."

John could feel Rodney twisting his fingers, searching then finding the prostate again and John arched at the feeling. He was loosening up, he knew he was, it was only his nerves keeping him from being completely ready. "Now, please, now, Rodney..." Now, before I lose my nerve and stop you, now because if you don't, I might go crazy, now because you're the only man I would ever trust to do this to me and I don't want you to know, not yet, you're too important and I...

The fingers were suddenly gone and Rodney was lifting John's legs, lining himself up, beginning to press inside. "Tell me if it hurts, I don't want it to hurt..."

"You couldn't, just go... go slow..." God, it was amazing. Rodney was hard and hot and too big; John felt like he was going to split into two pieces, both of which were going to melt into Rodney's rock-hard bed. Rodney was red-faced, panting, sweat dripping from his face, and his eyes were closed. "Rodney," John gasped.

"Oh God... yeah?"

"Look at me, please..."

"If I do," Rodney ground out, "I'm going to come, like right this second..."

Rodney was almost all the way in and it was beginning to feel really good, better than good, it was feeling fantastic but he needed to see Rodney... "Please..." John took a deep breath and as he blew it out, pushed himself down so that all of Rodney slid in.

"John!" There it was, finally. Rodney's eyes opened and he looked down at John. "John?" he whimpered, then dropped his chin to his chest and just shoved, mewling as he came hard, so hard John could almost feel him in his throat.

"Say it again," John gasped, reaching for his erection, needing to come so bad he felt like he would explode.

"What?" Rodney looked completely blissed out but managed to focus on John. "Say..." He blinked and looked down at John pulling on himself. "Oh." He bent enough to reach John's mouth and just before their lips met, he whispered, "John."

John came so hard his vision grayed out for a while. When he came down, Rodney was holding tightly, as if to never let him go. He wrapped his arms around Rodney and just held on... this time, Rodney wasn't leaving without him.

They stayed in Rodney's room that night. They did a lot of talking and kissing, more making out and having sex and John found out how competent Rodney was at blowjobs. He was so competent that John might not survive having many more. Rodney found out John hadn't bottomed before and
after smacking him, explained the concept of taking turns as if he was talking to a four year old. John just grinned and let him.

It was the best thing John had ever had. The Daedalus was due in two days, bringing Rodney's stuff and Rodney's sister, and hopefully not taking Rodney back with it. John was even reluctant to let Rodney out of his sight, which became a source of amused exasperation to Rodney after they woke the next day.

"What is with you?" he quietly asked John, during breakfast in the mess. "You're not usually a twelve year old girl, are you?"

John grinned. "Nope. Just making sure you're not going to be, you know, leaving. On the Daedalus, I mean."

Rodney shook his head and rolled his eyes. "You moron. Of course I'm not. I was only thinking about it. And anyway--"

He was interrupted by Elizabeth noticing them and coming over. "There you are. We had an unscheduled 'gate activation last night, we need to have a meeting."

"We did?" John gave Rodney a look. He hadn't missed any PA announcements, had he? Not that John would have noticed, though, especially when Rodney's mouth had been wrapped around his cock.

"No attempt to come through; rather it was a transmission asking for help," she explained, sitting down next to Rodney. "They call themselves Taranians and are apparently operating from an abandoned Ancient research base. They're asking for help in understanding an aspect of the geothermal energy running their base." She raised her eyebrows, looking from John to Rodney.

"Well. Sounds like a job for SGA team one, then," Rodney said, giving John a blinding grin.

end

End Notes

Okay, I kill Rodney, very dead. But he gets better. I also kill Carson and John and pretty much every other person on Atlantis, but at the same time, I don't. Since this was written for the 'Ways to Die' challenge at SGA Flashfic, you can understand all the death. However! I guarantee a happy ending!

How do I always get stuck with writing alternate reality stories? (Don't answer that, it's rhetorical.)

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